



How the Duke Ruined Christmas (Chase Brides / Revenge of the Wallflowers #43)

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Category: Historical

Description: A year after Jonathan Stanhope, the Duke of Rathborne, left Lady Claire Chase at the altar, her dolt of a brother invites him to their Christmas house party. Claire is livid—until she realizes she's found the perfect opportunity for revenge...

A year after Jonathan made the biggest mistake of his life, a baffling summons from his old friend brings him back to Greystone Castle—just in time for their annual Christmas festivities. From the moment he's reunited with his former fiancée, it's clear she means to turn his holiday into a nightmare. But no matter what Claire throws at him, he's not giving up on her this time...

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Greystone Castle

Wednesday, 22nd December 1819

11 o'clock in the morning. — Diary, you who have been used to receiving merely my appointments, menus, guest lists, and the like, must today serve a different purpose. Something has happened, something so shocking I feel a need to confide it in somebody right now, or I shall wear a hole in my dressing room carpet. And since Elizabeth is out on her (interminable) morning walk, you, dear Diary, must act as my confidante.

Where to begin? Perhaps with Noah, the traitor. How could he do this to me? The enormity—the impertinence—nay, the cruelty of it! While my brother is no stranger to thickheaded behavior (a recent example: falling asleep during our little niece's christening, with said niece in his arms—thank goodness Rachael caught the poor child!) I thought this beyond even him. Surely even Noah possesses the thimbleful of sense required to distinguish between a happy surprise and an utterly hideous surprise?

And what has he done, you may ask? Very well, I shall tell you. Noah, my brother, the thickest man who ever lived, has gone and invited the Duke of R

A quarter past. — Many apologies, beloved Diary, for what just happened. I did not mean to throw you across the room and mangle your pages. You've done nothing to deserve such treatment. I shall embroider you a new jacket as atonement.

It was just that I found, after working so diligently to bar a certain person from my

thoughts this past year, I could not now bring myself to write his name. Attempting to do so made me very angry, and I unjustly took that anger out on you, my faithful friend. I have now had a draught of wassail (with extra sherry) and feel much the better for it.

To protect you from further abuse, I have decided that within your pages I shall reference said person using only the epithet my sister Elizabeth bestowed on him: The Ratbag. Writing this name fills me, not with implacable, book-throwing rage, but instead with a sort of giddy and vengeful delight. I think I shall write it again in my finest calligraphy.

The Ratbag

His Graceless, the Duke of Ratbags

Rat-athan Bag-hope, 1st Duke of Rodent-upon-Satchel

La, I digress. Let us return to the present crisis, which is that I have just been given the identity of Noah's surprise invitee. Can you guess it? I fancy you can, for my deuced brother has invited none other than that abominable creature, that horrid wretch, that contemptible fiend— The Ratbag—to our Christmas house party!

What on earth was Noah thinking? When I asked him to seek out one more gentleman to even our numbers, did he happen to mishear “gentleman” as “evil incarnate”?

Or has he somehow forgot what The Ratbag did to me? Has Noah been all along insensible to my misery? All the rest of the family can see the change wrought in me since last Christmas. Elizabeth and Rachael, Grandmama and the aunts, the Cainewood Chases and cousin James—each one has noticed my lowered spirits and taken pains to try to bolster them.

Even Alexandra's husband Tristan, during last month's Vineyard Ball at Hawkridge, voiced his concern about what a wallflower I've become. I, who used to stand up with as many different partners as there were dances in an evening, have scarcely been able to look at another man since parting ways with The Ratbag. But my own brother has failed either to notice or to care, for otherwise he could not have ventured to force the blackguard upon me now.

Especially now , just when I'd finally mustered the fortitude to receive Lord M's attentions! It is too vexing! I was looking forward to this party, as I have not looked forward to anything in quite some time. But if The Ratbag attends, Christmas will be ruined .

I hate him.

I hate him.

I HATE HIM!

Why do I hate him, you might wonder? Oh, let me count the reasons...

TEN REASONS I HATE THE RATBAG

cannot take him at his word.

His extraordinary good looks hide his vileness.

The lock of thick, chestnut-colored hair that insists upon falling onto his forehead is irksome.

His fathomless eyes, which are blue as Burmese sapphires, make him seem deep and sensitive. But he's not. He's only sensitive where his mother is concerned.

That wicked half-smile of his is extremely distracting.

He smells too good. Also distracting.

He disappeared from society for the past year with nary an explanation. What does he think, we've all had nothing better to do than sit around wondering where he went? (Where did he go?)

He kisses like he means it. But he definitely doesn't mean it.

He left me at the altar.

THREE TIMES.

If Noah expects me to simply hold my tongue and play the good little hostess (much less forgive and forget), he will be sorely disappointed. I'll make no preparations for The Ratbag's stay here. Cater to him, after his infamous conduct toward me? Never! I shan't suffer my calligraphy pen to write his name on a festive place card. Nor shall I lay sprigs of wintergreen atop his pillows, or strew his hearth with fragrant cloves. If Noah wants the ogre treated as a guest, he can do the treating himself.

Instead I quite intend to hide in the workshop and pretend houseguests will not be descending upon us tomorrow. I shall set the last stone in my new ring, in case Lord M does indeed propose (as I believe he will). I cannot wait to see the finished ring on my finger, and see just how much better it looks than the crusty old one I almost ended up with. Crafting jewelry always cheers me up.

As does wassail. Alas, Mrs. O'Connor will surely look askance if I beg another cup so soon. Though, as the workshop is right next to the kitchen stores, it would be quite natural to look in as I pass by.

Noon. — More wassail is not helping. Nor is stone-setting. In fact, I couldn't even make myself do it.

Five whole days The Ratbag will be in this house. FIVE—WHOLE—DAYS. I want to scream!

Ten minutes past. — Screaming did not help. Only frightened my cat, who sprang onto the workbench and scratched up my casting molds.

I hear voices in the corridor, must hide you away now!

Exasperatedly,

Claire

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T wenty-year-old Lady Claire Chase managed to throw a cloth over the workbench—concealing both her diary and the evidence of the ring she was making—moments before the door burst open.

“There you are!” cried her younger sister, Elizabeth. She tossed a handful of fresh-picked, scraggly winter plants on a nearby table. “We’ve been ages searching for you!”

“We?” Claire echoed. “Who’s we?”

“Why, Noah and me, of course—er—” On realizing there was nobody behind her, Elizabeth retreated to the corridor. “Noah, you coward! Come here this instant!”

A sheepish Noah appeared in the doorway.

Elizabeth prodded him through it. “I found this one hiding out in the stables.”

“I wasn’t hiding!” Noah protested. “I was checking on poor Endurance’s hoof.”

“You were hiding.” Claire rose to loom over her brother as best she could at six inches’ disadvantage. “Because you are a coward. What else can one call a man who sends his valet to do his dirty work?”

“Ah”—Noah made a fair attempt at indifference—“so Collins delivered my message.”

But Claire knew him too well; she could tell by his stiff posture and elusive gaze that

he was dissembling, and she had no patience for it. Or for him. “Have you told Elizabeth what was in the message,” she barked, “or shall I?”

“He didn’t have to—the whole castle is talking about it!” Elizabeth gave the offender another poke. “Don’t you have something to say to Claire? Something that starts with a- and ends with -pology?”

He swatted her hand away. “I’m not convinced that I do. It’s my estate, after all, and Rathborne is my friend. Why shouldn’t I invite him to stay?”

Both sisters were incensed. Elizabeth’s green eyes blazed. Claire nearly upset the workbench in her haste to get at her brother. “Because he was my intended, who trifled with my heart!” she shrieked at the same moment Elizabeth let fly with a string of thoroughly unladylike expletives.

Whether Noah understood either sister was doubtful, but he grasped their tenor. “Claire,” he began when Elizabeth had worn herself out, “I know you and Rathborne have a thorny history?—”

“Thorny?” Claire repeated incredulously.

How dare Noah use such a trivializing descriptor as thorny? Noah, who knew every mortifying detail of that history. Who had been present at the first meeting, and kept a keen eye on their increasing attachment—had promoted it, even, as any man would promote an alliance between his sister and his wildly eligible friend.

He had applauded every step of their courtship. Had, in his capacity as the family patriarch, given his blessing upon their engagement, and witnessed Claire’s perfect happiness on the occasion. Had parsed and approved every particular of the wedding, the honeymoon, and the bride’s anticipated installment as mistress of her new home, the splendid Twineham Park. He’d even donned his best suit in readiness to give her

away.

But the suit had been donned in vain.

For the bridegroom, Jonathan Stanhope, the Duke of Rathborne, had never showed.

In confusion and despair, Claire and all her family waited at the church, she by turns fearing for Jonathan's safety and raging at his treachery. Finally, nearly two hours beyond the appointed time, she received word—not by the duke's arrival, but a messenger's:

My dearest and most beloved Claire,

I haven't the words to express how deeply sorry and stricken I am to have failed you today, a day I had awaited with the utmost impatience and joy. My mother took suddenly ill this morning, and the mysterious and alarming nature of her condition left me without opportunity for communication until the physician could be fetched and the patient made tolerably comfortable. Maman is resting now, though not yet out of danger. I hope you will credit that no lesser power than the love and terror of a devoted son could have kept me from making you my wife today. With the highest estimation of your compassionate heart, I beg your understanding and forgiveness.

Still (most hopefully) yours,

Jonathan

Though Claire could never be so callous as to revel in the plight of her soon-to-be mother-in-law, the effect of the letter was instantaneous and euphoric. For having feared no justification could exist for her intended's absence, here was justice aplenty.

As soon as the duchess recovered (which was very soon indeed), they set a new date to be married and resumed all their former happiness. On the appointed day, the wedding breakfast was prepared. The guests collected. The suit donned.

And, once again, the groom failed to appear.

Having languished in her wedding finery more than three hours, now quite certain her dreams were dashed—after all, what excuse could Jonathan possibly give for missing their wedding again? —news arrived at last. This time, the duke came in person, looking very foolish and telling an even more foolish tale.

By some great anomaly, he had managed to lock himself in his dressing room. Having made every attempt to break down the door, and then to make noise enough to notify passersby of his plight, he was eventually found by his mother.

The duchess grieved loud and long upon discovering his protracted imprisonment, for it was she who had summoned the whole household outside to see their master off for his wedding, thus unfortunately leaving no one within earshot of her son's shouts and bangs.

Ignoring Jonathan's entreaties to cease apologizing and fetch the village blacksmith, the duchess now summoned the whole household to the dressing room door, inviting each man to take his turn at fiddling with the latch and bruising his shoulder. This went on for quite some time until, finally, somebody brought the blacksmith.

Within moments Jonathan was free and racing to the church—although, of course, already far too late, as weddings had to take place before noon.

By the end of this account, Claire had gathered her courage. It was past time to voice an idea she had been mulling over for some weeks, ever since the duchess's abrupt illness and miraculous recovery.

“Is it possible,” she said delicately, “that your mother might be trying to prevent our marriage?”

His answer was just as Claire had expected.

Ludicrous! Inconceivable!

Why, maman was the last woman on earth who could ever sabotage her own son. Once Claire got to know her mother-in-law better, she would easily discount such suspicions, for anybody who knew the Duchess of Rathborne would inevitably find her to be the most affectionate of parents, and one who enjoyed an uncommonly close relationship with her only child.

In truth, Claire had found that already, despite having spent just one day in the duchess’s company. During their courtship, Jonathan spoke of his mother often and with great fondness, a trait Claire found endearing (at the time), since she herself was close with her family.

Once they became engaged, their first duty lay in paying a visit to Twineham Park, that the two women Jonathan loved might be introduced.

Twineham was located about three hours’ drive from Greystone Castle. Its late master, the previous duke, having embarked on his Grand Tour in the 1780s, had returned with a souvenir in the form of Henriette, the daughter of a French marquis.

Luckily for Henriette, her elopement removed her from France before the Terror commenced. Unluckily, her husband’s early demise left her quite on her own in a strange country, with a vast estate to run and a young son to raise.

In Jonathan’s telling, from that day forward she withdrew from society to attend to her duties, and as her son grew, so increased her reliance on him. He was everything

to her—her constant companion, her precocious helpmate, her pride and joy. For love of Jonathan, she had found the strength to endure, had dedicated her life to safeguarding his birthright. And in return he was ever eager to bestow all the filial gratitude, consideration, and love that was her due.

In Claire's observance, this was all perfectly accurate. Jonathan showed his mother a very pleasing attention and regard. He was forever agreeing with her judgments, deferring to her preferences, and ensuring she and her little dog always had the best chair by the fire.

It was all extremely proper, the model of a perfect son. Claire ought to have witnessed such scenes with satisfaction and approval.

And she did...for the most part. Except that one thought kept plaguing her as she watched the duo in their tableau of domestic harmony...

Where do I fit in?

But surely this was a mere trifle. Claire was being silly. So what if Jonathan was good to his mother—who could object to that? Would she prefer he abuse the poor woman? Could she truly be so petty and jealous as to wish they loved each other less?

Of course not! No doubt Claire was simply feeling a bride's nerves. It was natural to fret about such an upheaval in one's life—anybody would worry about finding their place in a new family.

But she would soon, to be certain, discover her worries had been needless. Jonathan was her perfect match and, moreover, his mother would be moving to the dower house after the wedding. The duchess had made the announcement herself during dinner, with only one or two exclamations at how easy and empty her days were soon to become, what with Twineham Cottage being so much smaller and simpler to

manage than the great house.

Thus, Claire set aside her misgivings and went ahead with the wedding.

And then with the second wedding.

And then, after many impassioned pleas, heartfelt apologies, and tender promises—all aided by the considerable force of Jonathan's charms (and Claire's extreme susceptibility to them)—with a third.

The third time, however, she laid down two conditions.

One: That Jonathan go to London and obtain a special license, so the wedding could take place as soon as possible, on any day and at any hour they chose.

And two: That upon returning from London, he would not put one toe outside Greystone Castle until they were married.

The conditions accepted, the wedding was set for four days hence: Christmas Day. Claire held her breath until Jonathan's return on Christmas Eve. And then she let it out. She felt at ease. Jonathan was here—right here beside her—and tomorrow at sunset she would become his wife.

The next day was a blur.

She remembered walking to church, but not a word of the Christmas service...

Sitting down to Christmas dinner, too excited to eat a bite...

Excusing herself between courses to rearrange the flowers, again...

A man in Rathborne livery barging into the dining parlor...

The duchess swooning into her plum pudding...

Chaos and smelling salts, sobs and pleas...

Jonathan's indecision...

Claire falling apart...

That terrible argument...

And then he was gone.

She had not seen or heard of him since that day. Until Noah put his foot in it.

"Thorny?" Claire snarled. "It wasn't thorny, dear brother, it was a humiliation! A farce! An utter?—"

"That," Noah spoke over her, "is all in the past. Rathborne gave me his word that he has no intention of renewing his pursuit of you. He comes only as a family friend."

"I don't care!" Claire couldn't immediately decide which might be worse: Jonathan pursuing her, or Jonathan treating her only as a family friend. "He gave you his word? He gave me his word— three times! —and three times he broke it! I will not have him in this house."

By now Claire was about three inches from her brother's face—close enough to see a flash of uncertainty in his eyes. But just as soon as the chink appeared, it was gone.

"I regret," he said in a quiet, firm tone, "that I didn't consult you before the invitation

was sent. But it cannot now be revoked. Rathborne will be coming here to Greystone. I cannot force you to be civil, but I can advise you that incivility will benefit no one, least of all yourself.”

As Noah strode toward the door, Claire and Elizabeth remained silent, more from surprise than anything else. Neither had ever heard their brother speak with such gravity. He cast Claire one more faltering look before passing into the corridor.

“What on earth has come over him?” Elizabeth wondered.

Claire just shrugged. Though she was baffled by her brother’s peculiar demeanor, it wasn’t currently the greatest weight on her mind.

For at this point, reality began to sink in.

Wretched as she’d felt this morning, having endured the mere threat of Jonathan’s presence, she still hadn’t quite believed it would come to pass. Until she’d heard the truth from Noah’s lips, part of her still clung to the hope of a mistake or a prank or something —some sort of release from this impending calamity.

Some stay of execution.

But that was not to be. Tomorrow he would arrive. She would have to look at him, talk to him, breathe the same air as him. With the memories of such bitter disappointment on her mind and the scars of an agonizing year across her heart, she would be expected to offer him oysters and make light conversation about the weather.

“I cannot face him,” she whispered.

“Yes, you can,” Elizabeth said instantly. She must have found her sister’s appearance

alarming, for she leapt to Claire's side and pressed her into a chair. "He is nothing to you, Claire—nothing but a Ratbag! Remember how he treated you? He may be a duke, but he is no gentleman—and therefore no loss to you."

Claire gave a wan smile. Elizabeth's heart was in the right place. And her thesis wasn't wrong.

But she was a year younger than Claire, and she had never been in love.

Claire's tabby cat, Kippers, leapt up to her lap and settled there, purring, as if he could sense her distress. "You're right," she said slowly, scratching the cat's chin. "The Ratbag is nothing—or, at least, he isn't the man I thought he was." That man didn't exist. "But all the neighborhood knows what happened last Christmas. Everybody will be looking at the two of us. And I can't ignore him, you know, as the party's hostess."

That would be an extreme breach of etiquette.

Claire groaned, her head sagging into her hands. "It's going to be hideous."

"Hideous, perhaps," Elizabeth said thoughtfully. "Though being hostess may present you with an opportunity."

Claire looked up to see a glint in her little sister's eye.

"You shall be solely responsible," Elizabeth went on, "for his accommodations, his food, his entertainments..."

Claire blinked. "And? Am I to rejoice in the opportunity of dancing attendance on him? Lucky me."

“Of course not.” Now Elizabeth looked positively wicked. “I was thinking the opposite.”

“You mean...” Claire frowned in confusion. “...I should be a neglectful hostess?”

“Not exactly. And certainly not to the party in general.” Elizabeth began to bounce on her toes, as she always did when something excited her. “I mean you should accord The Ratbag bad accommodations, bad food, and bad entertainments. Make him miserable. Avenge yourself—a little.”

Though her interest was piqued, after a moment’s thought Claire shook her head. “I cannot see how it would work. Mrs. O’Conner would never consent to placing a duke in inferior quarters. Nor would Monsieur Laurent send out objectionable food.”

“No, no, nothing like that.” Elizabeth paced around the wooden table she used to press flowers for her projects. “You know The Ratbag well—well enough to be more subtle. For example, how does he take his tea? What kind of bed does he like?”

Claire was scandalized. “How on earth would I know a thing like that?” she demanded.

“It’s only an example!” Elizabeth stopped and raised a hand for patience. “Say he liked soft beds. You inform Mrs. O’Conner that, due to his bad back, he must have a wooden board atop his mattress.”

Claire giggled. “I can’t say I dislike the thought. But wouldn’t he just ask the housemaids to remove the board?”

“Sure,” Elizabeth said, “but it would be an inconvenience. And by the time it were remedied, we’d have the next inconvenience lined up. He can’t very well spend his whole stay grumbling to the staff.”

Now Claire laughed outright—somewhat fiendishly—recalling how conscientious Jonathan had been as a houseguest. He'd always tipped generously, for he hated nothing so much as imposing on the staff. Claire had never seen him leave his room without a money-book stuffed with bills, nor fail to pull it out on the slightest pretext.

“I love it.” She rose to hug Elizabeth around the shoulders. “Truly, you’ve cheered me up so very much. We cannot actually do it, though. Noah would have our heads.”

“Oh, hang Noah!” Elizabeth cried. “What can he do to us, really? Our fortunes are legally secured, and Rachael would hardly let him turn us out of our ancestral home.” Their eldest sibling Rachael may not have been the earl, but she ruled the family by force of will. “Besides, he’s so oblivious he’ll never notice. Come now, Claire. You must remember something about The Ratbag we could use to our advantage?”

Claire sighed. Much as she would delight in torturing Jonathan, she feared she wasn’t up to the task. Her talents lay in jewelry-making, sewing, and other artistic endeavors. She hadn’t the diabolical bent for such schemes as these. Although...

Claire squeezed Kippers so hard he squealed and leapt off her lap in protest. She smiled. “I have an idea.”

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When Greystone Castle came into view, Jonathan Stanhope, the Duke of Rathborne, could scarcely parse the tangle of sensations that rose within him.

Apprehension, regret, tenderness, hope, melancholy, shame—all made their appearance. But despite the considerable pain attending each, there was yet another feeling which stood above the rest. One that had plagued him without cease—in fact, with greater increase—during the whole course of his ride.

Namely, hunger.

It was past three o'clock, and he had yet to eat a single bite of food today.

He was ravenous.

Having left Rome in early December, he'd arrived back in England only four days ago. When he finally made it to Twineham yesterday, he'd been dismayed to realize his most recent letter to his steward must have gone astray.

Instead of finding Twineham Park open and ready to receive him, he'd found it entirely deserted excepting a bewildered butler and a handful of under-servants. The rest of the staff were loaned out—a most prudent measure while the duke and his mother had been away from home all the past year, but not nearly so prudent when the duke arrived home to un-aired chambers, un-made beds, and nary a kitchen hand in sight.

No matter, easygoing Jonathan had declared. He would sup at the village inn and break his fast there the next morning, as well. By then it would be time to set off for

Greystone.

But one thing or another had kept him busy all morning, until he found himself obliged to skip breakfast and begin his journey if he meant (and he very much did mean) to arrive on time.

hours later, he severely mourned that decision.

But through the pangs of his stomach, he was not entirely oblivious to those of his spirit. It was no small thing, returning to this place.

Ah, here was the old quarry, on a rise beside the castle. He and Claire had walked out that way one morning early in their courtship. He remembered how gamely she'd climbed these terraces, eager to show him the view. How she'd slipped on a mossy stone and he'd caught her round the waist—the first time they'd touched.

And here was the bench encircling one of the great old trees dotting the lawn. That was where he'd proposed, on a warm evening in late summer, as they'd sat watching the sun dip below the horizon.

And here, after crossing the drawbridge and passing beneath the barbican gate, was the courtyard with its circular carriage sweep. This was the last place he'd glimpsed Claire, on a cold, gray day very like the present one. He could still picture her just as she'd looked then, standing in the middle of the sweep, watching him drive away from her.

Jonathan blinked the image from his eyes as his chaise came to a halt. A pack of Greystone servants descended at once, opening his door, retrieving his luggage, directing his team toward the stables. The sober and wiry old butler, Mr. Evans, led him into the saloon, where the family had assembled to greet their guests.

A middling-sized room with with a bank of mullioned windows, the saloon was decked out in laurel garlands and silvered candles. Though a roaring Christmas fire had drawn most everybody to the hearth, Jonathan's fancy was caught by something else: the sideboard bearing a late luncheon.

His stomach rumbled.

"Rathborne, you made it." With a hearty clap on the back, Noah Chase called Jonathan's attention from the luncheon. "Good man! I feared you were lost in some Roman labyrinth."

Jonathan chuckled. "The Labyrinth was Greek."

"Whichever."

As they shook hands, Jonathan was surprised to find just how glad he felt to see his friend. It struck him only now that the past year had been far and away the most solitary of his life. And after spending many months far from home among strangers and servants, then defying rough seas and punishing winter roads to return, he'd arrived only to find his house dark, empty, and devoid of comforts.

But here at Greystone, with a great fire in the hearth and a warm welcome from an old friend, he felt at last that he was home.

Unfortunately, such warm feelings lasted only till the next step in the receiving line. "Your grace," Elizabeth said frostily, her green eyes throwing icicles. "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas, Lady Elizabeth." After a very proper bow, Jonathan judged it best to move along in all haste.

But there the line seemed to end.

Where was Claire?

A quick glance around answered his question, for a familiar figure stood nearest to the fire. He couldn't see her face, but he would recognize her form anywhere. Willowy and regal, clothed in lavender poplin to match her unusual eyes, every glossy dark curl in its place...and enjoying the company of another man.

Though he and Claire appeared to be on intimate terms, the man was a stranger to Jonathan. He looked several years younger with fair hair, mild manners, and a boyishly handsome face. When he said something that made Claire laugh, Jonathan ground his teeth.

It wasn't until her second show of amusement that he noticed her laugh was different. It had always been boisterous and unbridled, almost to the point of indecorum, had she not possessed the charm to carry it off.

But now she laughed with restraint, with modesty. With a demure hand hiding her mouth.

Her posture, too, seemed different: upright and conscientious where it used to be elegant and natural. Her manner was all civility, no color. No spark. The change in her was striking—just as Noah had reported in his letter.

Well, not exactly as reported. When Noah wrote that his sister was in a bad way and, on her account, he must urge his friend's swift return, Jonathan had feared the worst. Bed-bound with melancholy, perhaps, or a dangerous thirst for strong drink. Or the corrupting influence of a seducer.

But here she was, out of bed and apparently untarnished. When she turned, her face

was as lovely and blooming as ever, her smile serene. She didn't look ill, or depraved, or even unhappy.

But nor did she look like herself. She looked...less. Less Claire than before. As though she'd somehow grown smaller, or more indistinct, or farther away.

Was Jonathan to blame for this alteration? He knew the events of last Christmas had changed him profoundly; that she may have been likewise affected was not implausible. But for now he could only guess at her feelings, since his informant had been unable to give assurances.

That Noah suspected Claire still loved him, Jonathan did not doubt. But he saw no evidence of love for him at the moment, engrossed as she was in another man's attentions. And since brother and sister were not in each other's confidence, he had to take Noah's suspicions with a grain of salt.

Unsure as he was of Claire's feelings, Jonathan knew his own: He still loved her. He wanted to marry her. He'd come to Greystone not just in response to Noah's summons, but also for himself, to see if he could persuade her to give him just one more chance.

Claire turned her head. Upon her first sight of him, her placid countenance betrayed nothing. She excused herself from the fair-haired gentleman, coming forward with a hostess's smile. "Welcome to Greystone, your grace."

She curtsied, and he bowed, striving to match her composure. "I'm pleased to see you, Lady Claire."

Something flickered in her eyes. "Won't you take some refreshment?"

"Gladly." With relief he followed her to the sideboard—for despite the sincere

yearnings within his breast, he hadn't lost sight of that enticing spread since the moment he entered.

After directing a footman to make up Jonathan's plate, she turned back to him brightly. "We asked Monsieur Laurent whether we might do something memorable for our first meal, so what do you think he suggested? Instead of oranges in our Christmas Eve baskets, we have a whole luncheon of oranges! Goose in an orange-wine sauce, orange mincemeat pie, orange-and-lemon-zested parsnip..."

Jonathan didn't hear the rest. He was too busy bailing out his sinking heart. By Jove, everything looked delicious. Succulent goose, steaming hot pie, oysters—oh, and lamb as well!

Too bad he couldn't eat a single bite of it.

How could Claire have forgot about his citrus curse? Eating or touching the fruit had always given Jonathan a terrible rash, as she had certainly learned last Christmas Eve when they all received their baskets.

She'd made a big fuss, ordering everyone to eat their oranges in their own rooms lest the insidious juice should find its way to Jonathan. Then, the next morning, he'd awakened to find a fresh-made basket hung on the door, beautifully woven out of little scrolls of paper and filled with all new gifts: Claire's handiwork.

He looked without listening as she explained the rest of the menu, scrutinizing her face for any symptom of cunning. Had she grown so indifferent as to forget all she knew of him? Or was this intentional?

Regardless, propriety dictated only one response. "What a delightful spread," he said, accepting the plate. It would be rude to refuse or request alternate fare.

But he reckoned he could get out of eating it.

“If it’s no imposition,” he added, mustering all the self-consequence of a duke, “might I take luncheon in my chamber? I should like to settle in directly.”

“By all means.” Claire signaled Mr. Evans, who sent his footmen to collect the demanding guest and the lunch things. Jonathan discreetly slipped the butler a shilling.

Noah stopped Jonathan on his way out. “That seemed a pleasant meeting,” he murmured, nodding toward Claire.

Jonathan followed his friend’s gaze to find its object conspicuously looking elsewhere. He would have disagreed with Noah’s interpretation, but he had yet to figure out his own.

And when briefly, seemingly in spite of herself, Claire met his gaze, Jonathan could not glean any more. Which was odd in itself: the Claire he’d known had been an open book, too assured of herself to bother hiding what she felt.

“It could have been worse,” he finally replied.

Apparently satisfied with this, Noah stepped aside. “I’ll not keep you from your luncheon. But would you join me in the billiard room afterward?”

Jonathan glanced at the longcase clock. “Will there be time for a game before dinner?”

“Two or three, I should think. When our French chef arrived, Elizabeth prevailed at last in imposing fashionable hours upon us. We dine at seven.”

Jonathan groaned inwardly. It was only half past three. He eyed his luncheon plate, almost tempted to brave the rash.

But then he brightened to remember—from his first Christmas at Greystone—that his guest bedchamber had harbored an elegant domed platter, stocked daily with festive treats. Salvation would soon be at hand!

Before quitting the room, he cast a final glance back at Claire. She'd returned to the fair-haired gentleman's side.

Lucky young chub.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:06 am

Greystone Castle

Thursday, 23rd December 1819

6 o'clock. — He's pleased to see me?

After the way he abandoned me last Christmas and then vanished for a year , he dares look me in the eye and say he's pleased to see me ?

The insufferable Ratbag!!!

One cannot but remark upon the alterations in his looks. Still tall and lean, with a Frenchman's straight nose and strong jaw, but his thick hair ragged, as though he'd cut it himself. His high cheekbones appear sunken, his skin looks tanned as a field worker's, and his dark eyes seem edged with new lines.

It would be a lie, I suppose, to call the changes unattractive. In fact, their effect is rather that of a world-weary knight returning from a crusade in some romantic ballad or other.

He's grown a bit gaunt and rough, to be sure. But what was lost in youthful perfection is more than gained by a new, intriguingly hardened and brooding aspect. He looks as though—in the improbable event of a heathenish gang descending on our Christmas house party—he would instinctively sling me over his shoulder and carry me to safety. Perhaps to the shelter of a cave, where his knowledge of the land might sustain us both in rustic comfort.

In any case—what was I writing of?

Right, his insufferability. To think how I've dithered, wondering whether we've taken the scheming too far, fearing Elizabeth's enthusiasm has run away with her.

Whoever knew my little sister could be so devious, not to mention enterprising? I merely supplied one or two hints, and off she went engineering stratagems with the proficiency of Napoleon. We must secretly descend from a race of elite pranksters, for Elizabeth seems to have discovered her birthright.

And if luncheon was her first trial, she passed with full marks. The Ratbag's face! I might have died laughing! Such a pout as I've never seen on a male beyond the age of five. The pitiable cad! I'd wager he ran tardy as usual and missed his breakfast this morning. Ha!

Elizabeth was right: a bit of vengeance is exactly what I needed. Having waited in dread of my first encounter with The Ratbag, to my great surprise I find myself reinvigorated—reawakened, even—as if I begin to emerge from a fog.

Dearest Diary, there is life in me yet! The clouds are lifting. Elizabeth is a genius, and I am a shallow creature desiring nothing more virtuous than an outlet for my spite. But I do not care! The Ratbag deserves my spite, and I fancy I deserve a bit of sport at his expense.

Oh, that pout! I keep bursting out in fresh laughter. That pout alone might carry me through Christmas. My apologies if this has become difficult to read—it's because I find myself dancing about the room as I write. I shall have to stop soon, however, for my quill is running out of i

A quarter past six. — Confound it. Diary, you must forgive me! I was dreadfully careless to spill the inkwell. An unfortunate blunder—your poor pages! I shall send to

London for new sheets to replace the stained ones. Only the finest hot-pressed paper, you have my word!

That I may find calmness, let us set aside The Ratbag—insufferable man!—for now. He must not be so consequential as to overshadow the rest of the company.

He came first to my pen, I daresay, merely because he entered the castle last, and with the most consternation. All our other guests had the good grace to arrive punctually and behave as expected. To wit:

Rachael: my elder sister. With the critical eye of Greystone's former mistress, immediately and minutely enquired into all the party arrangements. Managed not to openly insult them, which Elizabeth and I took as a remarkable compliment.

Griffin: my brother-in-law. Devoured half the buffet in ten minutes, then stretched out on a sofa.

Lord Milstead: my determined suitor. Paid me every possible attention, to the point of preventing my conversing with anybody else. He does flirt charmingly, however. And he's handsome.

Lady Caroline Nicholls: same as previous, only with respect to Noah. Will she catch him at last? (Doubtful.)

Mr. and Mrs. Nathaniel Chase: a younger son from the Lakefield branch of the family who became (slightly) acquainted with Noah after a chance encounter at White's. So far he and his wife seem affable, if impertinently interested in the value of our furnishings.

Captain Henry Talbot: Noah's school chum. Still a hopeless gamester.

Miss Mary Harris: Elizabeth's bosom friend. Still a flibbertigibbet.

Hmm, it only now occurs to me how ill-provisioned Elizabeth is—not one suitable man to flirt with! And the way left quite clear for Captain Talbot! Profligacy aside, there's no denying the man can cut a dash. I shall have to take it upon myself to keep a close watch upon my sister, since her friend Mary is not to be relied on for anything like sense.

Now I must set you aside, dearest Diary, for it's time to go down to dinner. I confess I anticipate an evening of great enjoyment...and shall be very much mistaken if The Ratbag can say the same! Ha, ha!

Vengefully,

Claire

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:06 am

When the time came to dress for dinner, Jonathan realized his trousers were missing.

Well, not all of them were missing. He had brought no valet with him to Greystone, having parted ways with his man when he reached Dover, but upon entering his bedchamber, he'd discovered the castle's (remarkably efficient) staff had unpacked all his things while he'd been in the entrance hall. His clothes were neatly arranged in the armoire, his grooming items laid out on the dressing table.

And, as he discovered at half past six, though all the trousers he'd brought for riding and daywear were present, his evening trousers seemed to have disappeared.

Hot with embarrassment and well-supplied with shillings, he rang for the housekeeper. In the end, despite Mrs. O'Connor's considerable ingenuity, she was not quite able to unravel the mystery. All she could ascertain was that somebody had bid one of the housemaids to send all his grace's evening trousers out for laundering—but no one could find where the request originated or, indeed, where the trousers were sent.

Jonathan appeared in the drawing room a quarter of an hour late, his brow as furrowed as the ill-fitting suit he'd borrowed off his host. He was dismayed, if not surprised, to find the whole party still assembled there; his status as the highest ranking man had left them without the power of starting dinner in his absence.

"My deepest apologies," he began with earnest discomposure, addressing the hostess in particular and the company in general.

"Do not trouble yourself, your grace," Claire broke in. "A delay of fifteen minutes is

hardly the worst I ever suffered.”

Jonathan winced at the pointed allusion.

“You can see we are all at our leisure,” she went on, “and still enjoying our sherry. Mrs. O’Connor kept us abreast of the circumstances.” Her gaze strayed to his lower half with a slight quirk of her lips.

Brilliant. The whole party had been talking about his trousers. They must have had a good laugh at his expense.

Mortification roiled Jonathan’s already-precarious stomach. Earlier, in his chamber, he had located the hoped-for domed platter, but this year it contained only a few plain, hard biscuits tasting rather of sawdust. Though he’d devoured every crumb, they’d done little to alleviate his hunger—or to mitigate the two or three brandies pressed on him in the billiard room.

Perhaps it was the brandy’s influence, but as he endured Claire’s amusement something in her appearance struck him oddly. After a few moments’ consideration, he realized it was her gown.

There was a time he’d been closely familiar with all her wardrobe, since he’d remained at Greystone through nearly the whole of their many-weeks-long courtship. Earlier she’d been wearing one of her favorite morning gowns, which he’d seen on many occasions. But tonight she wore something new.

It was stunning, of course—a gown in deep green silk with a spill of lace obscuring just enough décolletage for good taste—but unfamiliar. Alien.

It made Jonathan realize that a year had passed. Not just a year of his life, but of hers . A year in which he had no idea what she’d been wearing, doing, reading, or

creating. All at once, he felt profoundly sad to have missed everything.

Especially when she returned to laughing with the fair-haired young chub, and ignoring Jonathan altogether. The other guests followed suit, all returning to little clusters that seemed inaccessible to newcomers.

Shifting uneasily, he discovered a new sympathy for wallflowers as his gaze wandered about the room, inspecting wood paneling, tasseled curtains, and ancient ceiling beams. But upon realizing he stood directly under a swag of mistletoe—pathetically alone—he switched to scanning the room’s occupants in search of a friendly face.

By the hearth, Claire and her young chub were in company with her two sisters: the younger, Elizabeth, who Jonathan knew well; and the eldest, Lady Cainewood, who he’d encountered a handful of times. The three ladies of Greystone origin were all lovely and rather alike—slim and graceful with oval faces, dewy skin, and matching dark hair. Only their eyes were different: Lady Cainewood’s sky-blue, Lady Elizabeth’s clear green, and Claire’s that compelling amethyst.

Over by the windows stood their brother Noah, who shared all their matching features. He too would have been quite pretty—perhaps embarrassingly so—if not for the scar that slashed through one eyebrow. With a glazed look in his blue eyes, he was talking to (or rather, being talked to by) Lady Caroline, an imperious blond with an upturned nose. Jonathan had got fairly well acquainted with her last year, for as the only child of Greystone’s nearest neighbors, she was a fixture around the castle—especially since she’d reached marrying age and set her sights on poor Noah.

The final knot of five guests were arrayed on the sofas. Two were ladies, one unknown to Jonathan and another he recognized as Miss Mary Harris, Elizabeth’s excitable friend who’d been invited for Christmas last year.

The three gentlemen he either knew or had met at billiards. Noah's brother-in-law, the Marquess of Cainewood, was a mediocre shot but a good sport. Then there was a fashionable-looking fellow called Captain Talbot, who'd been forever attempting to raise the stakes.

But it was the third gentleman Jonathan finally decided to approach. He was a distant cousin of Noah's called The Honorable Mr. Nathaniel Chase, a reedy gent with generous sideburns didn't play billiards, but declared he was fond of spectating. Though his idea of spectating had been to crowd the table and direct his chatter toward whichever player was attempting to concentrate, Jonathan hadn't minded. Mr. Chase had earned his good opinion by beginning a lively discussion of Roman amphorae, and since Jonathan had a great fear of boring his friends with his obscure interests, he could not but relish an opportunity to converse with a fellow antiquarian. Now he was looking forward to another such conversation.

But as he made to join Mr. Chase on the sofa, a footman pulled the bell. Claire announced dinner, prompting everybody to rise and Jonathan to abandon his planned discourse on aqueducts.

As they entered the dining parlor, he was dismayed to recall that two of the guests were still strangers to him—the lady on the sofa and Claire's young chub. Quite suddenly he felt all the impropriety of sitting down to dinner with people to whom he had never been introduced.

Inevitably he was honored by a place next to Claire's at the top of the table, an arrangement which gave no one any pleasure. Claire was composed but noticeably tense, and for his part, Jonathan would have much preferred to maintain a distance from her until he could contrive a private meeting.

He looked away, pretending to admire the artful centerpieces devised of winter greenery and gilded paper, until Claire, never remiss in her duty, deftly made the

necessary introductions. The young chub turned out to be a Lord Milstead, a viscount come all the way from Shropshire. And the unknown lady seated to the right of Jonathan, wearing a sharp-eyed look on her lightly freckled face, was The Honorable Mrs. Nathaniel Chase.

“Your grace’s notice is an honor,” she gushed, awe softening her gaze. “I’d no notion this little house party would be so very fine! Is not my cousin Claire a dazzling hostess?”

Jonathan would have answered in the affirmative had not Mrs. Chase kept right on talking.

“Is not Greystone simply enchanting? Such distinguished tapestries! They do so complement the china—which I believe I’ve seen in the window at Wedgewood & Byerley—twelve shillings apiece? Indeed, a very fine party! And I hear we’re to have some sort of surprise recreation in the morning?”

A general pause ensued, for none of her listeners had expected a genuine question.

“Yes,” Cainewood eventually jumped in to answer, “there’s always a surprise outing during the Greystone Christmas party. A tradition begun by my wife when she was mistress here.” He cast a fond look down to the other end of the table, where Lady Cainewood was seated by her brother.

“Last year it was skating on the River Cainewood,” Claire added.

“How enchanting!” Mrs. Chase exclaimed. “What’s it to be this year?”

“A surprise,” Elizabeth said sweetly, prompting a ripple of laughter.

Mrs. Chase was prevented from responding to this bon mot by the arrival of the first

course, which was laid out with great ceremony by a troop of synchronized footmen.

Dish after dish materialized, beautifully dressed and artistically arranged, until scarcely any tablecloth could be seen. Jonathan's mouth watered, and nothing less than the manners that had been drilled into him since birth could have restrained him from serving himself before the ladies.

Claire was already being helped by her cousin Cainewood, which left Jonathan at the service of Mrs. Nathaniel Chase. "Oooooooh," she moaned, examining each and every platter with slow, maddening thoroughness. "How on earth shall I choose? Everything looks sublime. And yet I'm full to bursting after the gorgeous luncheon, not to mention the delightful spread in my chamber. I never can help myself when it comes to gingerbread!"

"Gingerbread?" Jonathan echoed bemusedly. Surely she couldn't mean those tasteless biscuits?

"The gingerbread was capital," Cainewood agreed. "Though I was particularly partial to the winter-berry tart." He aimed an admiring nod in Claire's direction.

She smiled modestly. "The recipes are all your sisters', Griffin. Oh, excepting the Irish whiskey cake—that one came from the Delaney family. Did it turn out well?"

As everyone within earshot exclaimed over the Irish whiskey cake, Jonathan wondered if he was delirious (from hunger?). Had he somehow overlooked a large, reportedly delicious cache of sweets in his room?

Mrs. Nathaniel Chase continued to hem and haw while every other lady and gentleman were served and began to eat. At length she selected a helping of everything within her neighbor's reach (and he had a long reach).

Finally Jonathan found himself at liberty to attend to his own plate. His first choice would be the rich stewed lamb immediately before him, and he had the ladle in hand when a figure appeared at his side.

“I beg your pardon, your grace,” Mr. Evans murmured with a deep bow. “May I present your meal?”

Jonathan startled and relinquished the ladle as the butler replaced his empty plate with a full one. “I—er—thank you, Mr. Evans,” he said in utter confusion.

Had the butler taken it upon himself to fill a plate for him? That would be very odd!

But no, upon examining the plate in question, Jonathan realized his mistake—for it contained no food at all resembling what was on the table, instead bearing two delicate silver bowls filled with generous portions of thin gruel and soft-boiled eggs, respectively.

Though it seemed a stretch to call the eggs soft-boiled. They appeared so “soft” they might as well be raw. Which was, well...

The word disgusting came to mind.

In horror and bewilderment, he turned to question the gray-haired butler. But Mr. Evans had deftly retreated. The diners around Jonathan were all engrossed in their own food—except Claire, who watched him with an air of benevolence.

“Our kitchen received the instructions sent from yours,” she said in a discreet undertone, which was nonetheless easily heard by everybody at their end of the table. “I hope such fare will ease your complaint.”

Jonathan was speechless. Their interest now piqued, his neighbors all craned for a

look at his plate, afterward displaying their various aptitudes for concealing distaste and derision. “Must be bilious,” he heard Lady Caroline whisper to Captain Talbot.

If Jonathan wasn’t bilious before, he certainly was now. His stomach roiled. But what could he do?

As a gentleman and a guest, contradicting his hostess in public would be unforgivably rude. The only man who might attempt it was Noah, but ensconced as he was at the bottom of the table and in animated discussion with his neighbors, he was, unfortunately, oblivious to his friend’s plight.

Jonathan’s state of mind was fast progressing from desperate to feral.

Days of anxiety and suspense had already depleted his reserves, before ravenous hunger began to gnaw away the remainder. Adding to that, the cruel taunts of the luncheon, the alleged chamber-sweets, and the glorious feast in front of him (with its irresistible fragrance of stewed lamb assaulting his nose), juxtaposed beside the offense of gloopy egg and gray sludge—not to mention the mortifications of his vanished trousers and “bilious” stomach, nor the gall of Claire speaking a bare-faced lie with all the magnanimity of St. Brigid gifting jewels to the poor?—

Well, after enduring all that, could any man be faulted for losing his temper?

And Jonathan nearly did. He was a breath away from upending his plate, seizing the tureen of lamb, and digging into it with both hands.

But his good breeding held—only just. Seething to his very core, every minute costing him a year’s patience, he yet managed to keep his seat. He even choked down a few spoonfuls of gruel (the egg was not to be attempted).

Whatever penance Claire was determined to foist on him—and it was abundantly

clear that this dinner was penance, as was the orange luncheon, the sawdust biscuits, and perhaps even the pilfered trousers—he was equally determined to endure.

He would prove to her that he had changed, that he would never again let anything—or anyone—come between them. No matter what schemes she might concoct to make him leave, he would stay right here by her side.

Accordingly, after the first course was cleared and the second arrived, he served the indecisive Mrs. Nathaniel Chase with endless patience, ignoring his own throbs of hunger. And when Mr. Evans appeared at Jonathan's elbow with another plate—this time containing colorless cabbage mush and dry, stringy mutton boiled to within an inch of its life—he thanked the butler profusely.

“Please convey my compliments to the kitchen,” he added to Mr. Evans, though pointedly looking at Claire. “All the food has been exactly to my standard and agrees with me exceedingly.”

Claire looked surprised, and Jonathan felt gratified to have finally got some sort of reaction out of her.

Especially when, seemingly despite herself, the corners of her lips turned up.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:06 am

That night, Claire couldn't sleep. A sudden storm broke over the castle, rattling its windows and howling through its battlements. Yet she wasn't kept awake by fearful noises, or even anxious prayers for the weather to clear by morning. No, though a tempest raged all around her, what disturbed her rest was the far more piddling occasion of a stomach ache.

Even worse, the stomach ache was her own fault. Having been too diverted to eat much at dinner, then too flustered to eat anything at teatime, she had thought to fortify herself with a cup of coffee, though she usually took only tea or chocolate. Now she felt shaky, empty, and sick.

Of course, one could lay part of the blame at Lord Milstead's feet, for it was he who'd rendered her too flustered for teacakes. Taking her side immediately upon entering the drawing room, he'd stuck there like a burr the rest of the evening. In the course of which, just before tea was announced, he'd mentioned in passing the fact of his father having proposed to his mother at a Christmas party, with just such a meaningful look as Claire could hardly fail to understand.

She was very aware of the mistletoe dangling from the drawing room's chandelier. And for the time being (at least), she was making sure not to stand under it.

For even though his pending proposal was no great surprise—even though he'd been invited here for just this purpose, and even though she'd already made up her mind to accept him—she couldn't help feeling just a touch of panic.

Which was perfectly natural.

Right?

A proposal is a momentous event. Enough to make any woman nervous. It would be strange had she not felt so!

Although, come to think of it, she could not recall feeling any nervousness when Jonathan proposed. She remembered feeling excited, wildly in love, and so happy that her heart might actually burst out of her chest, or inflate like a hot air balloon and carry her to the clouds.

But not nervous.

Which was neither here nor there. In fact, likely this was further evidence that Jonathan was the wrong man for her. She must have known, deep down, that the marriage would never take place. Hence, no reason for nerves!

Such lines of reasoning relieved her feelings, but they did nothing for her sour stomach. After untold hours curled up in a tragic ball, she threw back the covers.

Her belly cried out for food, but having none to hand (alas, the fancy domed platters were for the guests, not the hosts), she would have to try other remedies. She walked up and down the room, cooled herself by the window, warmed herself by the hearth, and splashed water on her face—all to no avail.

At last, she stifled a groan. There was nothing for it: She needed to eat.

She lit a candle and slipped out into the dark and drafty corridor. Lightning streaked across its small, high windows as her feet, shod in her warmest slippers over two pairs of wool stockings, found their unerring way to the kitchen.

She wasn't alone, because (unsurprisingly) Kippers had followed her. But upon

entering the kitchen, she was startled to perceive another occupant in the space lit by just one dim candle.

Surely the poor scullery maid wasn't still washing up?

No. The figure hunkered over the worktable was that of a man, garbed in a loosely tied dressing gown and nightcap. With dismay Claire recognized him by the thick, chestnut lock that escaped his cap to fall into his eyes. And with stupefaction she watched him continually sweeping it back, though the same lock would inevitably fall again a moment later due to the violence with which he shoveled food into his mouth.

As had been the case during their entire courtship, she found herself itching to touch that unruly lock.

Could anything be more ridiculous?

Unconsciously, her hand went up to close her own dressing gown tight at her throat. Despite having been moments from marrying this man (three agonizing times!), Claire had never appeared before him in a stitch less than full dress.

Not that she had anything new on display—rather the opposite. Swathed in her heavy winter nightclothes, there was no chance of exposing even a single bodily curve. Still, no man save her brother or late father had ever seen her in such a state.

Luckily, this particular man was too preoccupied to look. Before him lay a burlap parcel, ripped open, its contents spread across the table. Spare bits of pie, picked-over joints of meat, jars and canisters of stewed fish and vegetables...why, it was the remains of their dinner!

And over said remains stood Jonathan, gorging himself like a man half-starved.

Which, Claire supposed, he was. Hadn't she and Elizabeth made sure of that?

Still unseen, Claire began to retreat. Could she gain the corridor without drawing his attention? She rather thought she could—and would —have succeeded, if not for the inconsideration of the step stool beside the doorway. She tripped, threw out a hand to catch herself, and caught instead a rack of copper pots, knocking several to the floor with a thunderous clamor that sent Kippers scampering away.

Jonathan leapt to his feet, brandishing an eating knife. “Who's there?”

Claire stood blinking in the dark—and realized her candle had been lost and gone out amid the confusion. The room's only light now came from Jonathan's candle on the worktable. She was grateful for the cover of darkness that preserved her modesty.

But now she found it necessary to speak before he gutted her with the dull blade. “You know,” she said in her haughtiest tone, “that food parcel was intended for the poor.”

Though his face was hidden in shadow, his body let slip a little start of recognition. He set down the knife. Then he seemed to hesitate, silence stretching between them. Claire could not see his eyes, but she could feel their gaze on her, appraising her.

At last he reached into one of his dressing gown's pockets, pulled out his money-book, removed several banknotes, and placed them beside the knife. “Shall this make recompense?”

Claire raised a brow at the generous denomination. “That will do.” Having nothing else to say, she turned to go.

“Claire—wait—won't you join me?”

Incredulity brought her up short. “Join you?” Aside from the impertinence... She looked pointedly at the table littered with crumbs, empty vessels, and used silverware. “Join you for what?”

“Er...” He began rooting in the burlap. “Ah! There’s still some bread, and”—unearthing a jar—“I saved you the prawns.” He presented them with an air of great chivalry.

Claire snorted. “A noble sacrifice.” Though prawns were her favorite, she knew Jonathan despised them.

While she continued to hang back, he bent to restart the banked fire in the kitchen’s big cast iron stove, then left the stove’s door open to add welcome heat and light. “I’ve something else for you, as well.”

“A fork?”

“No—well, yes.” He selected one and began polishing it with a fresh napkin. “But that’s not what I meant.” When the fork sparkled, he arranged it beside the bread and jar of prawns. “I’ve been hoping for an opportunity to speak with you alone, because I owe you an apology.”

Now he’d piqued her interest. Not that any sort of apology could melt her heart enough to forgive him, but it might be nice to hear, all the same.

She looked down at herself regretfully. “If I were decent...”

He chuckled. “You—the strange creature shivering in worsted wool last summer while we humans roasted in linen—not decent? You must be wearing four layers at least.”

Five, actually. She wore two shifts and a flannel dressing gown beneath her plush velvet one, plus a shawl wrapped round the whole. And she was still cold.

But she wasn't about to admit as much aloud. Jonathan didn't deserve the satisfaction of knowing he knew her so well.

However, he'd convinced her she wasn't indecent. Feeling more comfortable (well, aside from being chilled to the bone), she found herself moving toward the table, drawn chiefly by the prospect of the warm fire and vindication, alongside, not inconsiderably, the temptation of buttered prawns.

In silence he watched her settle on a stool, uncork the jar, and begin eating.

An uneasy quiet reigned until Kippers reappeared, seemingly from nowhere, and nimbly leapt onto the table. No doubt he'd smelled the prawns.

"Down!" she said, not expecting Kippers to obey (as he never did). She threw a prawn on the floor, and he jumped down to devour it.

Finally Jonathan cleared his throat. "Where to begin?"

She held his gaze calmly, making no reply. She would not help him. Nor would she betray any hint of curiosity. Sangfroid was to be her byword.

She tossed Kippers another prawn.

Jonathan looked away, fiddling with the napkin. "It seems all too inadequate to say 'you were right' and 'I'm very sorry' but...well, there it is."

She paused with the fork halfway to her lips.

I was right about what? she wanted to demand. Or perhaps seize Jonathan by the shoulders and shake the answer out of him. But her composure held. She placed the prawn in her mouth, chewed thoroughly, and swallowed before coolly responding: “I fear I don’t understand.”

“Ah. Right. I beg your pardon. No matter how many times I imagined this conversation, it was never quite—but that’s of no consequence.” He cleared his throat again, his evident discomfort eclipsed only by his painful earnestness. “Allow me to clarify: You were right about my mother’s deception, and I’m very sorry I didn’t believe you. I learned the truth when we arrived in Neuf-Marché, to find my grandmother not on her death bed and gasping her last.”

“I knew it!” Claire cried out, then choked on a mouthful of bread. She coughed and sputtered until Jonathan offered her a cup of something, which she gulped gratefully. When it burned a path down her throat, she realized it was brandy.

“Thank you,” she murmured as she returned the cup, her face hot enough that it must surely be red as a beet. “I—er—am pleased to learn the marquise is not ill.”

“Oh, she is ill,” he said matter-of-factly. “Consumption. But it’s not often quickly fatal, and she’s always had a strong constitution, so she seems likely to remain with us a few years more.”

“I see.” While Kippers rubbed against her legs until she gave him another prawn, Claire’s mind was busy reordering the facts. “Then...when the messenger came to Greystone last Christmas Day, he did bring news of the marquise’s illness? But your mother mistook the urgency of the case?”

“No, and no.” Jonathan grimaced. “I’ve no idea what news the messenger brought—and perhaps there was no news at all, its invention being part of maman’s ruse. Because she’d already learned of the diagnosis several weeks before. And, I

assume, understood the lack of immediate danger, or she would have sailed to France much earlier.”

“She knew for weeks and kept it from you?” Claire watched as, apparently satiated, Kippers curled up near the stove and promptly fell asleep. “Why would your mother do that?” she asked. “Just so she could use it to stop our wedding?”

“Probably.” Jonathan shrugged. “But that’s just a guess. I know no details. After seeing grand-mère upright and catching wind of maman’s lies, I left. Hired the first chaise I could find and got as far away from her as I could. We haven’t spoken since.”

Claire felt surprise, and perhaps just a touch of triumph, at this turn of events. She wished she could have seen Jonathan’s defiance and his mother’s reaction. If the woman had hoped that sabotaging her son’s marriage and breaking two hearts in the process would result in keeping him all to herself, she must have been bitterly disappointed. Claire could not help reveling a little in her enemy’s comeuppance.

And she felt glad for Jonathan. Defying his mother was a great step forward.

For him, of course.

As far as Claire was concerned...well, she wasn’t. She had no concern regarding the matter at all. It was far too late for that. Had he rushed immediately from Neuf-Marché to her side, perhaps things might have been different...

“Where did you go after that?” she heard herself ask, abandoning all pretense of incuriosity.

“Paris,” he said ruefully. “To embark on the Grand Tour my dear maman was always too frightened to allow.”

In truth, most young men of their generation had eschewed the coming-of-age tradition of touring the continent—unless sent there to endure the horrors of French warfare. But a hopeful peace had endured four years now.

“Wait. No,” he suddenly added under his breath. “She said she was too frightened, but in fact she was merely set on keeping me by her side.” A heavy sigh escaped his lips as he shook his head in apparent disgust. “In any case, I meant to follow my father’s route. From Paris to Lyon, Marseille, then on to Genoa, Florence, Venice, and Rome.”

The picture of him flitting about Europe, traveling in the greatest luxury, days filled with vivid landscapes, palatial cities, ancient treasures—a sultry, buxom Italian lady on his arm—made her jaw clench.

“How splendid,” she said through gritted teeth.

He fixed her with a penetrating gaze, his deep blue, expressive eyes making her fear the imminence of an ill-considered disclosure.

Hoping to head it off, she continued hastily: “Which city was your favorite? Rome, I’ll wager, unless you stopped in Pompeii? Ah, you did! Splendid. You must have been in heaven among all those antiquities.” The ones they used to talk about seeing together in future, for Jonathan had always been fascinated by ancient history. “The temples and amphitheaters and—er—columns,” she heard herself babbling on. “How perfectly splendid.”

La, how many times had she said splendid?

She fell silent.

And still the expression remained in his eyes. She braced herself for a declaration.

But instead of professing his love, he said: “In point of fact, it wasn’t particularly splendid. It was sad. Since the war...” He shook his head. “The devastation on the continent is beyond imagining. I found it difficult to enjoy the sights when all around me I saw so much suffering. People are destitute. Their homes and livelihoods were ripped from them. They still suffer from disruptions to trade, heavy taxation, massively higher costs for everything...so much impact. Though they’re beginning to recover, they still have so far to go.”

“Oh!” Her cheeks burned. “Of course! I was not thinking. We English are like to forget—now the threat of invasion has passed—that the continent was not as lucky. How such scenes must have afflicted you.”

“Some did.” He shrugged. “But, truth be told, I did not dwell overmuch. My mind was otherwise occupied. Any momentary distraction could not but give way, and very soon, to thoughts of you.”

There it was: the confession she’d feared. His tender look made his meaning clear, and her expression must have betrayed the question roaring in her mind— Then why the dickens did you not come back? —since he answered as if she’d spoken aloud.

“I wanted to come back. I should have come in an instant had I any hope of winning you over once more. But I knew all hope must be in vain.”

Claire found that she was holding her breath. “How did you know?”

He gave her an odd look. “You told me so yourself. Have you forgot what you said to me in the carriage sweep? Wretched as I’ve been—difficult as it was to stay away—I was never so far beyond honor as to consider forcing my attentions upon a woman who had declined them so decisively. I have not forgot what you said.”

Nor had she.

Those words would be burned into her brain until her dying day, for she'd had ample time to rehearse them while Jonathan rushed about making all the arrangements for his departure. And as they'd parted ways in the snow-covered sweep, she'd delivered her speech with a quiet ferocity that had satisfied her pride—if nothing else.

“Should you go,” she'd told him, “you're not to come back here. Not ever. Nor may you write to me, seek me out, or approach me in public. I never want to see you again.”

His eyes had pleaded with her. “You know I must go.”

“You're choosing to go. You're choosing her . And by the time you've seen your mistake, it will be too late. I'll be lost to you forever. So make your choice now...and live with the consequences.”

Though tears had run down her cheeks, she'd held his gaze and refused to wipe them away. Let him see what his betrayal was doing to her. Let him—a man who abhorred nothing so much as the sense of having injured or imposed upon another—see all her naked grief and know he was the cause.

His face was contorted with guilt and remorse, and she wasn't sorry for it. All she'd wanted in that moment was to hurt him as much as he was hurting her.

And she'd rather thought she was succeeding. He'd looked like she felt: as if his heart were cleaving in two. He'd even looked, for just a moment, as if he might change his mind.

But then an ear-splitting wail had commanded his attention, and he'd glanced over his shoulder. Behind him was the chaise, and in the chaise was his mother—bent over, hands hiding her face, sobs racking her body.

He'd made his choice. He'd climbed in and settled her little yapping dog on her lap.

And Claire was left standing in the snow, an icy wind stinging her wet cheeks.

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When Claire spoke again, Jonathan heard an iciness in her voice. “Well, then why are you here in our kitchen?”

He was taken aback at the sudden change in her demeanor—and perplexed as to how he should respond.

No matter, though; Claire hadn’t finished yet. “You said you would never force your way in against my wishes. You said you had no hope of winning me over. Yet here you are at my home...against my wishes...trying to win me over.” She rose to her feet. “Why did you come?”

He was silent a moment, considering the question. “I always did hope—without any right to hope—that I might hear some hint of your softening towards me. That’s why I kept Noah abreast of my travels.”

“Noah?” Appearing astonished, Claire seized the table, looking like she needed it to help keep her balance. “He knew where you were? All year?”

“Of course.” Puzzled, Jonathan frowned. “Didn’t he tell you?”

“Why should he tell me?” Her voice rose, tinged with something that just might be hysteria. “I’m sure he couldn’t be bothered. He’s never given a moment’s thought to anybody but himself, after all!”

Jonathan wanted to defend his friend, but thought better of it. “I’m so sorry, Claire,” he said instead, with all the sincerity he could muster—which was a lot. From the bottom of his heart, he meant every word he was saying. “I thought you knew where I

was—or at the very least, could obtain the knowledge should you want it. I didn't mean to fall off the face of the earth, if that's how it felt to you."

"Of course not!" Her voice rose even higher. "What in the perfectly ordinary circumstance of your vanishing for an entire year, with nary a word of your whereabouts to anybody save my stupid brother, could have possibly made me feel that way?"

He felt a flicker of frustration. "I was only trying to respect your wishes! You said you never wanted to see or hear from me again. I did what you asked."

"No, you didn't!" she burst out. "I asked you to choose me!" Breathing hard, she hugged herself, as if she were trying to rein herself in.

"I wish I had," he said quietly. "I know now that I was wrong, not—" Upon her starting to speak, he raised a hand. "Please let me finish. I was wrong, not only because maman was a saboteur, but in principle. Even had she been perfectly innocent, still I would have been wrong to prioritize her distress over yours. You are the woman I should have vowed to love, honor, and keep, not her. Perhaps it required the shock of her treachery to teach me that, but I have learnt the lesson."

To this speech Claire said nothing. Was she absorbing what he'd said? Or struggling with a response? Either way, Jonathan took her silence as encouragement enough to continue.

To attempt to close his case.

"Claire," he began. "Oh, Claire." His voice cracked, as it hadn't since he was an adolescent. "I realize there is nothing I can do to erase my past offenses, though I can promise never to repeat them. Your pardon would be a kindness rather than a justice, and certainly more than I deserve. I only desire you to know that I've changed

and—well, that I’m still here.”

He paused for a much-needed deep, heartfelt breath before locking his gaze on hers.

“I’m still yours. If you’ll have me.”

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He's still mine.

Claire felt unable to decipher her own reaction. Esteem and the glow of validation were at war with doubt and indignation, and if the seedlings of forgiveness or affection were anywhere to be found, she couldn't perceive them.

Correcting his error now, she reflected bitterly, after the damage was already done, did not oblige her to forgive and forget.

And yet...

Still mine.

He just stood there, looking at her.

Waiting for her.

He didn't even blink.

I'm still yours if you'll have me, still echoed in her head.

Still mine.

At last, Claire felt something shift—just a hair's breadth—within her. She was not disarmed, but she felt the first inkling of danger.

It would be so easy, such a relief, to fall into his arms and let him soothe away all the

hardships of the past year. No more constant little stings of deprivation.

Her skin, deprived of his warmth.

Her body, deprived of his intoxicating nearness.

Her heart, deprived of the bubbly joy that had carried her smiling through all her days, from the day they met to the day he left.

For a moment, she let herself imagine that those comforts could be hers again. He could be hers again. It seemed impossibly indulgent—after yearning so long for just a word or a glimpse of him—to instead imagine him always by her side. They would be always together. They would be quickly married. They would ride off in a carriage and begin their new life at?—

At Twineham Park.

“What of your mother?” Claire asked abruptly.

Jonathan raised a brow. “What of her? She’s nothing to me now.”

Claire saw right through his indifferent facade, but decided not to remark upon it just now. “Has she given up the dower house?”

“No, but that doesn’t signify.”

“Does it not?” Claire planted a hand on her hip. “She’ll be living a quarter mile from our—that is, your doorstep.”

“So?” He twisted his mouth into a sneer. “A quarter mile is distance enough if we decline to acknowledge her. I was at Twineham just yesterday and never clapped eyes

on the woman.”

“You’re certain she was at home?” Claire pressed. “And didn’t try to see you?”

“I’ve no idea. I instructed the butler to turn her away and henceforth never utter her name to me.”

Claire laughed without humor. “And this is your plan? You’ll spend the rest of your life tiptoeing round your own house and pretending she doesn’t exist?”

“Only the rest of her life,” he retorted. “Unless she should decide, on her generous widow’s portion, to remove somewhere else—to Brighton, perhaps, or even Neuf-Marché. Then all parties would be satisfied.”

“Satisfied?” Claire scoffed. “You think your mother will ever give up on reconciling with her beloved son? Or that you and your tender heart could just throw her off with nary a scruple?”

His eyes flashed. “I can be as stout-hearted as the next man.”

“I’m certain you can, in support of a just cause. But avoiding your mother because you’re scared to face a quarrel is not what I would call a just cause.”

“I’m not scared!” He took up the poor napkin again, wringing without mercy. “I simply don’t care to waste my time. There’s no reasoning with her.”

“How do you know? Have you tried?”

“No, Claire,” he said with exaggerated sarcasm. “Incredibly, I somehow managed to live with the woman for twenty-nine years without ever engaging in a single reasoned discussion. You know, just because you were right about my mother’s deception does

not mean you're an authority on everything .”

“No, not on everything.” Claire drew herself up. “But I am most certainly the highest authority on my own feelings. And I feel your mother’s shadow still hanging over us—and between us. The problem hasn’t gone away; it’s only been swept beneath the rug.”

He fixed her with an exasperated scowl. “I don’t understand what you want from me. Maman tried to keep us apart, so I severed ties?—”

“I never wanted?—”

“—but now you turn around and say I must reconcile with her?”

“Not reconcile with her, confront her! Stand up to her, instead of pretending she’s gone. Stand up for yourself! And for me.”

He wrenched a hand through his hair. “For you I would, if I believed any good might come from it. But I see no chance of that. And frankly, I don’t see how my relationship with her is any concern of yours.”

Claire felt as if he’d slapped her. “Then you haven’t changed as much as you think!”

His chin jutted stubbornly. “I promise you, she won’t listen to a word I say.”

Claire could match him for stubbornness. “Whether she listens or not, you’ll have said your piece. You’ll have faced her like a grown man, instead of hiding like a cowed child.”

“Ah, just as you faced me like a grown woman, instead of trying to drive me away with childish pranks?”

“I—” She stopped. And flushed. “You’re right, of course. I have been childish.” She sank back onto her stool, worrying her lip.

His temper seemed to cool. “No doubt Elizabeth goaded you into it,” he said in a blatant attempt to cushion the criticism. “By-the-by, what have you two in store for me tomorrow?”

“Nothing,” Claire fibbed, making a mental note to speak with Monsieur Laurent and Mr. Evans first thing in the morning. Oh, and the stables as well! Could she get round to all of them in time? “Our tricks are quite finished.”

“What a relief,” Jonathan drawled. “I feared my trousers must be given up for lost.”

La, she would have to locate those before dinner time! Hopefully Elizabeth knew where they’d got to. “Fear not,” Claire said with feigned confidence. “All shall be put to rights.”

His eyes sought hers. “Between us, as well?”

“Er...”

For a moment, what she saw in the depths of those eyes overpowered her: crushing tenderness, tortured hope...an undercurrent of desire.

She looked away to escape the onslaught. “As far as friendship is concerned, I accept your apology and bear you no ill will.” Or not much, anyway. “But beyond that...”

She shook her head.

“It’s too late, then. As you forewarned.” He braced himself against the table, seeming suddenly exhausted. “And everything we once meant to each other—that means

nothing to you now?"

"Not nothing," she said gently. "Just...not enough."

"I see." In seeming response to her gentleness, his tone grew sharper. "Or perhaps not as much as Milstead means to you?"

Before she could open her mouth—before she could even feel outrage—he thumped himself on the forehead.

"No, don't answer that. It was wrong of me to ask." He blew out a breath. "Friendship, then. I should like to give it a try, though I've no idea how to proceed. Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know." Exhausted too, Claire rose. "Right now, we go to bed."

"Wait—"

"Good night, your grace."

In a low growl, he said, "Don't 'your grace' me, Claire."

A delicious shiver raced down her spine. She'd never heard him speak that way before. Her name on his lips—that almost wild, guttural Claire —echoed in her ears. It seemed to stoke something buried within her—a dim glow—a faint heat. But she quashed the sensation with all her might, instinctively drawing away from him.

"Claire," came another growl, which made her knees go rather weak. "Where do you think you're going? It's pitch-black out there, and you've no light."

She lifted a sleepy Kippers and tottered to the door. "I know my way about the

castle.”

“Take my candle.”

“I’ll be all right.” Before he could stop her, she fled into the dark.

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Greystone Castle

Friday, 24th December 1819

The middle of the bloody night. — Confound it, I still cannot sleep! Having gone down to the kitchen in hopes of settling my stomach, instead I've only managed to unsettle my mind. What time is it? No, I shall not look. I should rather not know, for daybreak cannot be many hours distant.

Really, upon reflection, I'm inclined to think Jonathan The Ratbag dreadfully inconsiderate! Surely unburdening oneself to one's former lover at such an hour, and with no regard for said lover's quality of rest, is quite infamous behavior? Is it not the very height of selfishness? For now I shall continue awake the whole night through, thinking over what I've heard and puzzling over what I've felt, instead of replenishing myself with much-needed slumber.

What a ghastly toil tomorrow will be! How can I hope to endure the day's engagements, including our surprise outing? After wasting the night in a wearisome stupor, robbed of even the barest scrap of a wink of sl

Half past six o'clock in the morning. — I fell asleep.

I know you shall pardon me, most wise and merciful Diary, for conscripting your unwitting self as a pillow. Your binding has only slightly split beneath the weight of my head. I shall have you re-bound, of course, along with the new pages and embroidered jacket, just as soon as our guests depart.

I dreamt of Lord M, I think. He was down on bended knee, but instead of proposing he removed his hat and revealed a headful of snakes, like Medusa's.

So that seems a good omen.

My one bit of luck: the storm has finished. Hallelujah! I fancy dawn shall break clear, though it's still too dark to tell. I'm crossing all my fingers (except the ones I'm using to write).

I suppose nobody else will be stirring for a while yet. Which suits me just fine; I can use the time to write out my directives and save myself the trouble of rushing about to give them in person. Let me see how many there are...

M. Laurent: His Grace no longer to require special diet (cancel calf's foot jelly, dry burnt toast, etc)

Mr. Evans: Footmen to disregard cold bath order from Ruby Room (send hot water instead)

Mrs. O'Connor: Ruby Room to require fresh bedclothes (warn maids about smell)

John the Stableman: Upon further consideration, do please put Serenity to harness in place of Chaos

Elizabeth: Where are trousers???

La, what a sad waste of poor Elizabeth's ingenuity. My sister will be sorely disappointed. To be sure, the entire operation was childish, petty, and mean, but it was also great fun.

How I hate when Jonathan is right!

A quarter to seven in the morning. — And yet, was I not just as right about his childish behavior as he was about mine? Is he not acting awfully naive by pretending his mother into a ghost?

But perhaps I would overstep—were I his wife—to concern myself with the matter. Heaven knows I haven't any right to scold him in my new capacity as a friend.

I must dwell no more upon it. Especially since I ought to be writing my directives.

Ten minutes to seven. — Though mustn't it be said that, were I his wife, the matter surely would be a legitimate concern for me?

For I, too, would be obliged to live next door to a ghost—and accept my share in all the attendant nonsense. When word goes round the neighborhood, how would I hold my head up? What would I tell my new neighbors? What would we tell our children? What if they wished to know their grandmother?

And if Jonathan cannot face a quarrel, what of the quarrels that inevitably arise in marriage? Would he shut his eyes to all my little foibles and mistakes until the day I go too far—and become a ghost myself?

Five after seven. — And by-the-by, what did he mean about hearing a hint of my “softening” toward him?

Did Noah write him that I was softening?

I suppose it does not signify, given said softening never occurred .

Ten after. — Though if Noah did write something of the kind, I cannot but take it as further proof that he's never cared a whit for me.

What motive could prompt him to tell such a lie? Merely desiring a reunion with his friend? Or was he perhaps, in the loss of a high-ranking connection, feeling the blow to his own consequence? Whatever its basis, I can scarcely conceive a more egregious betrayal! It boils my blood!

But I really must get on writing these notes. Others will soon be stirring.

A quarter after. — How I long to confront Noah and learn the truth! Yet I dare not risk a scene with the house full of company. So long as this dratted party continues, I must play the gracious hostess and keep my mouth shut.

Come the end of Christmas, however, he shall have much to answer for!!!

Half past. — Men are a plague. Every last one of them. Hang Noah and his lies, Lord M and his proposal, Jonathan and his...well, existence.

A pox on them all!

A quarter to eight. — Sun is coming up, and it appears to be a rare sunny winter day. Hurrah!

Oh no, voices in the corridor, and my notes yet unwritten! Ahh!

Frantically,

Claire

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Jonathan awoke—or rather, opened his eyes—when the first glimmer of morning spilled across his face. He very much doubted whether he'd dozed off even once, curled as he was on a short sofa with his greatcoat spread over him. His legs were stiff, his neck cricked, his eyes stinging with fatigue.

But when he peeped out a window, the answering view seemed to cure half his ailments. A glorious winter's day—crisp, clear, and blanketed in fresh snow—followed last night's storm. The immaculate stretch of white looked to Jonathan like a fresh start.

Yesterday may not have gone to plan, but today was a new day.

And the late-night brush with Claire had not been an outright failure. She may have refused his hand, but at least she'd accepted his apology. He could fancy he'd seen one or two layers of frostiness thaw away, and then, just before she'd bolted, a flare of...something.

A small and fleeting something, but something nonetheless.

He had seen it. He was sure of it.

He'd followed her surreptitiously to ensure she found her room, then returned to the kitchen to rebank the fire. After a slow and bleary march back to his own chamber, he'd gratefully crawled into bed—only to leap right back out.

He'd staggered away, coughing till his eyes watered, for some unpleasant and thoroughly pungent odor—camphor oil?—enveloped him. Claire and her sister must

have soaked the bedclothes in it, the treacherous fiends! Were he not already retching, he might have laughed himself sick. Camphor, of all things! Someday he would have to ask those two where they'd got their inspiration.

Assuming he survived their Christmas party, that was. It appeared the tricks were not finished, after all, and Jonathan feared his endurance had reached its limit. He could only hope the bedclothes were a parting shot, and henceforth Claire would keep her word.

His faith was soon rewarded.

Well, not too soon, because first came the long hours spent languishing on a too-small sofa, awake and uncomfortable and muttering stronger oaths than treacherous or fiends . But upon stumbling bleary-eyed and muddle-brained into the breakfast parlor (from which Claire was mysteriously absent), he at last found reprieve—for he was both graciously allowed to partake of the general fare and mercifully spared the trouble of talking to anybody.

For the latter blessing he owed thanks to Mrs. Chase, who, having sat herself beside him, proved more than capable of conducting a tête-à-tête without any assistance from him.

At length, two (or three?) cups of coffee rallied him enough to leave the breakfast table and make his way into the saloon. There he hid behind a newspaper until all the guests were called to assemble outside.

On his way through the entrance hall, he observed a rushed and rather out-of-breath Claire finally making her appearance. As she descended the staircase, she donned leather gauntlets over at least two pairs of crocheted mitts, then buried both her hands in a fur muff.

A charming prospect awaited them all in the carriage sweep, by way of half a dozen horse-drawn sleighs festooned with brass bells, sprigs of holly, and red silk ribbon. Following the expected declarations of surprise and delight, the guests were shown to their conveyances, a gentleman and a lady being assigned to each.

Jonathan's allotment was the rear-most sleigh and Elizabeth's friend, Miss Mary Harris. She was a lively young lady with wavy red-gold hair that framed impish blue eyes. But after two minutes' conversation exhausted their commonalities, they both fell silent and looked about.

Climbing into the sleigh ahead was Claire, who did not take her seat but leaned forward over the apron.

"Elizabeth! Psst, Elizabeth!" she whisper-shouted. In the next sleigh, a red-bonneted head turned. "Elizabeth, what are you doing back here? You're supposed to be up front with Noah!"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Noah shan't mind if Captain Talbot does not."

The top hat beside her turned then, too. "Indeed, I do not," Talbot confirmed with a roguish grin.

But Noah did mind, if his horrified expression were any indication—for he had just worked out that he was to be left in the clutches of the lovesick Lady Caroline.

Like a man on trial, Noah looked imploringly from face to face. Elizabeth turned up her nose. Claire gave a helpless shrug. Jonathan felt for his friend and would have happily switched places, could such be done without slighting Miss Harris. But since that was impossible, all he could do was shake his head in sympathy.

With manful resignation, Noah squared his shoulders and donned his riding gloves.

Then he began the long march toward his doom—only slightly delayed, upon drawing near his sisters, by his lunging to deliver a withering, “I’ll make you pay for this!”

“No need, brother dear!” Elizabeth called cheerfully after him. “The accounts are still in your favor!”

When Jonathan was comfortably installed, with his feet against a warming-box and a blanket over his lap, he accepted a pair of reins from the stablemaster. “Serenity’ll do well for ye, yer grace,” the man said with a bow. “No steadier horse in Sussex, I wager. She’s the far better choice.”

“Better than what?” Jonathan would have asked, had he any chance. But the sleighs ahead were already in motion, and the groom sent Serenity after them with a click of his tongue.

Amid his exhilaration, Jonathan soon forgot the puzzling remark. Greystone Castle sat amid wide pastures and gentle rises, all perfectly suited for easy and speedy dashing.

Rays of sun peeked through clouds to emblazon the glittering snow. Icicles clung to naked trees. A bracing wind whistled along to the cheery jingle of bells and the crunch of hooves meeting snow. And though the cold nipped at Jonathan’s cheeks and nose, the rest of him stayed delightfully snug beneath his blanket.

Steadfast as advertised, Serenity trotted along without any need of direction. Jonathan was therefore content to leave such matters to her and enjoy the scenery, though he found his gaze most frequently, and unaccountably, rested on the sleigh ahead of them.

While its passengers were his beloved and her new beau, Jonathan did not stare

daggers at Milstead nor pine for a glimpse of Claire's face. (Not at the moment, anyway.) In fact, all he could see of the lady was her heavy cloak, for her head lay deep inside its fur-lined hood.

That hood, however, was almost invariably tilted up toward the gentleman, who gazed down upon his companion in a manner that (Jonathan imagined) was very earnest. Though Jonathan could not see their expressions or hear their conversation, he could sense the air of gravity between them.

It was evident something of great intensity was taking place.

Miss Harris also took notice. "Begad!" she cried. "I suspect Lord Milstead is proposing at this very moment!" She craned for a better view. "Back in the castle yard, did you see how they both got under one blanket?"

Jonathan had seen no such thing and very much doubted Miss Harris had, either. Still, the mere thought opened a pit in his stomach.

Was Milstead proposing?

Had Jonathan already lost?

He quite suddenly found himself staring daggers after all, and spent the rest of the ride blind to the breathtaking scenes whizzing by.

After half an hour, the little convoy rounded a copse and, one by one, slowed to a halt in the middle of a large field. They seemed to have reached their destination: an odd cluster of snow-shrouded mounds and thatched shelters, and beside them, a great tent.

Upon leaving their sleighs, everybody gathered to peer at and puzzle over their surroundings. Except Jonathan, who peered only at Claire and Milstead, trying to

detect some evidence of the alleged engagement. But they exchanged no meaningful looks, intimate gestures, or happy blushes, merely appearing rather anxious on her side and wooden on his.

The detective remained in suspense.

“Very well, cousins,” Cainewood said loudly, “you’ve had your fun keeping secrets from the rest of us. What is this place?”

Claire’s worried frown reshaped itself into a smile as she moved to the front of the group. “Lord Cainewood is right—it’s time to reveal all.”

She approached a gentleman of middle age who, though not of the Greystone party, was familiar to Jonathan. After a private but clearly friendly chat, she turned back to her guests.

“Let me introduce Mr. Hawkins, who joins me in welcoming you to the Bignor Villa.”

A chorus of “oohs” and “ahs” rang out, along with a “huh?” or two. Those native to Sussex had all heard of the Bignor Villa, for there was a great hubbub a few years ago when its Roman-era ruins were discovered beneath a local farm.

The excavation had been ongoing until quite recently, as Jonathan well knew, since it was the very reason he’d come to Greystone last year (wooing Claire had proved an unexpected bonus). Mr. Lysons, an antiquary friend and leader of the project, had invited Jonathan to come visit the site and examine its artifacts. An enthusiastic hobbyist, Jonathan had eagerly accepted and arranged to stay with an old schoolmate who happened to live nearby: Noah Chase, the Earl of Greystone.

“Since it’s closed for the winter, we shall have the place to ourselves,” Claire went

on. “As a friend of our family, Mr. Hawkins has granted us special access for the day.”

A friend of their family? Ha!

The Chases had known nothing of Hawkins or anyone else at Bignor before Jonathan came along. It was he who’d first brought Noah here—and he would have brought Claire too, had the site been fit for ladies at that time. He’d promised, however, to take her at the earliest opportunity and, in the meantime, returned to Greystone many an evening with some new etching or relic to interest her and her siblings.

Surely she remembered all this? Surely Jonathan and the villa were inextricably linked in her mind?

He searched her face for signs of awareness, but she avoided his gaze and continued: “Our very kind friend has also offered to tour us about the ruins. But first, please come this way.”

She struck out directly toward the tent, trusting the others to follow. As they circled round to the front, Jonathan observed three of the tent’s four sides were draped in thick hangings to ward off the chill. The fourth was left open, revealing an interior piled with carpets, cushions, blankets, and a low table set for luncheon. The effect was luxurious and cozy.

“A picnic in wintertime, Claire?” Lady Cainewood raised a skeptical brow. “Won’t you be cold?”

Lifting her chin, Claire marched past her elder sister and claimed her place at the head of the table. This was everyone’s cue to take their own places, and they obeyed.

Beneath the table they found foot warmers and sheepskins enough to dispel all of

Lady Cainewood's doubts. Once the steaming teapot went round, the guests were quite as comfortable as they could wish.

As the duke, Jonathan had been assigned a spot beside Claire again, of course, with Mrs. Chase on his other side. His spirits revived by hot tea and Cheshire sandwiches, he lounged among a heap of cushions, feeling almost carefree. Though he would have liked to renew his acquaintance with Mr. Hawkins, whom he recalled as a well-traveled sort full of interesting stories, at the moment their relative placement allowed for no more than perfunctory conversation.

Instead, Jonathan admired the view beyond the tent opening, which was principally of the adjacent bath house. Or rather, what once had been a bath house, for all that remained of it were crumbling foundations, the rough outlines of an elegant plunge pool, and a remarkable mosaic floor.

Somebody had swept the mosaic clear of snow. Worked in thousands of tiny millennia-and-a-half-old tiles, it depicted intricate patterns of entwined snakes surrounding the head of Medusa. Though her face was ugly and cold-eyed, Jonathan knew the Roman Britons had looked upon the monster as a protector, and privately he greeted her with all the warmth of an old friend.

"Mrs. Chase," he felt so enlivened as to inquire, "I wonder whether you share your husband's antiquarian bent?"

"My Nathaniel, an antiquarian?" Mrs. Chase threw back her head and laughed. "Begging your grace's pardon, but whatever gave you such an idea?"

He frowned. "We discussed Roman amphorae?—"

"Oh, he did once made a mint off a pair of those"—she leaned closer and whispered—"which, between ourselves, may or may not have been genuine." She

emitted a little laugh, or maybe a tiny snort. “I assure you, your grace, that is quite as far as his interest extends.”

Jonathan was dismayed by this revelation and, perhaps out of habit, looked to Claire to share his feelings. But she clearly hadn’t heard the exchange. Instead she seemed absorbed in gazing upon the Medusa, her brow once again crossed with anxious lines.

Amid feeble and fading hopes, Jonathan hadn’t forgotten her offer of friendship—and just at present, she appeared sorely in need of a friend. Though he wasn’t sure how, he resolved to try his hand at cheering her up— as a friend.

Casting about for a neutral, friendly overture, he finally settled on: “Is this your first visit to the ruins, Lady Claire?”

Startled from her reverie, she took a moment to return from wherever her mind had been before hearing his question. She shook her head. “My brother brought me here in the spring.”

He felt a pang of disappointment.

He’d wanted to be the one to show her this place.

“Your friend Mr. Lysons kindly gave me a tour,” she went on. “I was sorry to hear of his passing soon afterward.”

Jonathan nodded his thanks, for his speech was hindered by a sudden tightness in his throat. Though Mr. Lysons had died in June, the news hadn’t reached Italy till September. He’d been a good man, a venerated scholar, and something of a mentor to Jonathan.

“He seemed very fond of you,” she added kindly.

“Oh?” Jonathan cleared his throat. “Mentioned me, did he?”

She smiled sidelong. “He spoke of little else.” Deepening her voice like a man’s, she added: ““These tremendously important shards were assembled by young Jonathan.”“

He laughed heartily at that. “You do a fair impersonation.”

Her eyes twinkled. ““Young Jonathan reckoned this heap of rocks was a stable, though it’s clearly a garden shed.’ ‘And we discovered our seven-hundredth hypo-whatsit the day Jonathan fell through the floor.’”

“Bah, treachery!” he cried, wiping tears of laughter. “He promised to keep that secret! And the word is hypocaust .”

“La! If you say so.” When her mirth subsided, she added more soberly: “Jokes aside, Mr. Lysons spoke of you like a son. One who made him quite proud.”

Jonathan’s pleasure mingled with a familiar feeling of guilt, for he was all too conscious he’d been a poor ‘son’ to Mr. Lysons this year. While the old scholar kept up their longtime correspondence, the young protégé, mired in gloom and self-pity, never found the will to answer his letters.

And then it was too late.

But after talking with Claire, he felt a little better. He liked picturing the two of them—the love of his life and the father he’d never had—together, on a fine spring day in Mr. Lysons’s favorite place. “I’m so glad he got the chance to meet you, Claire.”

As soon as the tender words left his mouth, he threw her a look, for he hadn’t meant to say them aloud.

Had he crossed the bounds of friendship already? Were things spoiled between them? She gazed back at him warily, perhaps asking herself the same questions.

His musings were interrupted by a piercing laugh. Heads whipped round, till most everybody was staring at Elizabeth's friend, Miss Harris, who, unaware, continued her fit of hilarity. When Jonathan looked to see who'd sparked her amusement, he was surprised to find none other than Milstead, stretched out by her side and flirting outrageously.

If Claire felt equal shock, she had more success hiding it. The only visible change was a slight compression of her lips.

What did that signify? Jonathan wondered. He was wild to unravel the mystery. Had he witnessed a proposal?

Or something else entirely?

Either way, Milstead was a bounder to flirt with Miss Harris after his marked attentions to Claire. Why in blazes would he do that?

The last question was easily answered. Milstead's smug glances in Claire's direction made his intentions clear enough: He meant to make her jealous. But she refused to take the bait.

Jonathan could not but admire such dignified restraint. His pride in her was almost as fierce as his desperation to learn what had happened on that sleigh.

Apparently Miss Harris finally realized everyone was gaping at her, for she checked her laugh—while still remaining intently focused on Milstead. She had to be aware of his entanglements (and surely knew he'd crossed the border of impropriety), but she appeared far too diverted by his scandalous behavior to think of curbing it.

Which seemed to embolden Milstead even further.

At a rather unnecessary volume, he asked: “Shall we make ourselves a tour of the villa, Miss Harris?”

Noah’s eyes blazed in defense of his sister’s honor. “Now wait a minute, Milstead. My sister intends for us all to go about together with Mr. Hawkins. It would be ill-mannered of you to break up the party.”

Milstead turned to Claire. “Surely you can spare the two of us, Lady Claire?” he said with polite venom. “For Miss Harris and I wish to walk on our own .”

A corner of Claire’s mouth twitched. “If Mr. Hawkins has no objection.”

Mr. Hawkins replied that he had none, provided the unchaperoned explorers took care.

Silence reigned as a leisurely Milstead climbed to his feet, straightened his clothing, and offered Miss Harris his arm. The young lady accepted it, visibly vibrating with excitement, and ran away with her scoundrel.

Captain Talbot broke the silence. “As it happens, Lady Elizabeth and I were also contemplating a solitary ramble.” He looked to Elizabeth. “Were we not?”

She glanced from his beseeching face to Claire’s, which was starting to turn red.

“Only if my sister truly doesn’t mind,” Elizabeth said, sounding guilty—for it was plain that her sister minded very much.

Jonathan had seen Claire lose her temper just a handful of times. It was a rare occurrence, but once she’d crossed the Rubicon, the resulting outburst could be every

bit as violent and ungovernable as the Roman Civil War. Now he saw signs of danger, and he could tell by their panicked faces that her siblings saw them, too. As Elizabeth froze up and Noah looked to Jonathan, he found himself obliged to take charge.

“What’s that?” he shouted out the front of the tent at nobody, then turned to Claire. “Lady Claire, I think the upper footman is needing you for something.”

Rising, Claire peered outside. “Where is he?”

“You don’t see him?” He rose as well. “I’ll escort you.”

With a hand on her shoulder, Jonathan steered her toward the tent’s opening. “Since the hour grows late,” he added, looking back to Noah, “perhaps we ought to have Mr. Hawkins begin with the six of you. We’ll join you momentarily.”

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“Wait—” Claire began.

“Just over here,” Jonathan said firmly, propelling her onward.

He didn’t let up until they’d got far enough from the tent to avoid prying ears. Then he relinquished her shoulder and, bracing for her reaction, blurted out, “There was no footman.”

“I worked that out for myself,” she said dryly.

And to his amazement, with perfect equanimity, continued their walk.

He kept pace beside her, wondering what she could be thinking. “I’m sorry for the trick,” he ventured. “But I thought you might need a respite from the party, presumptuous though that may be. I wanted to make certain you were all right.”

“You mean: You wanted to make certain I didn’t lose my temper.”

Sheepishly he raised his eyes—and, to his great surprise, found hers twinkling. “You’re taking this extraordinarily well.”

“You’re right; I ought to be scolding you. But as I did need a respite and I was losing my temper, I cannot conceive how.”

“You could scold me for tricking you,” he suggested.

“You really think I have any right to reproach you on that score?”

He grinned. “Fair point.”

The matter settled, they strolled along companionably till Claire asked, “Where are we going?”

A moment’s reflection taught him where his feet were headed. “The Venus Room. Unless you’d rather rejoin the others?”

“Goodness, no!”

Her vehemence once again raised Jonathan’s curiosity. But he kept to himself as they ambled among the hovels—thatched structures purpose-built to protect the site’s most significant archeological findings.

The hovel they ducked into had been built upon the Roman foundation walls of a large, airy room that jutted out from the rest of the complex. Lysons had concluded it was an audience chamber, where the villa’s owner would have conducted public business, received supplicants, and dispensed local justice.

“Ah, I remember this room,” Claire said, blinking round the dim interior. “Mr. Lysons said it was your favorite.”

Jonathan nodded. The chamber’s expansive floor was almost entirely filled by a masterpiece of ancient tile-work, much finer and more detailed than the Medusa. At its apex was the head of Venus, goddess of love and fertility, flanked by her customary peacocks and lotus flowers.

“These little cupids are darling.” Claire crouched to admire an ancillary segment of the mosaic. “What are they doing?”

Though he knew the cupids by heart, Jonathan moved to regard them over her

shoulder.

The winged figures occupied a strip of vignettes which, taken together, told a story. “Those two are dressed as gladiators of differing classes: a secutor and a retiarius . Here, you see them in combat. Here, the secutor is kept from killing the retiarius . Next, before the fight resumes, the retiarius shows generosity by offering a fallen helmet to his opponent, who spurns it. Lastly, we see the secutor strike his death blow.”

“Hmph. Seems rather a callous allegory. What does it mean?”

“Who can say? Roman ethics bore little resemblance to our own.” He couldn’t resist adding (with feigned innocence): “Perhaps the retiarius is a traitor and his generosity a mere ploy. I’d argue such men deserve callousness.”

Her sharp look told him she’d caught his meaning—in this instance, the retiarius was Milstead. Straightening up, she began a ponderous turn about the room.

He suspected she was deciding how much to disclose.

“That is one possible interpretation,” she said at last, clasping her hands behind her as she walked. “Shall I tell you another?”

“Please do.”

“Let us suppose the two gladiators are of disparate origins.”

“Quite plausible, since they were often drawn from the far reaches of the empire.”

“Indeed. And due to their mismatched views, though the reta—roti ? —”

“Retiarius.”

“Yes, though the retiarius’s gesture is sincere, the secutor takes it amiss.”

“Ah, a clash of customs.”

Claire nodded. “You agree, then, that in such cases neither party can be blamed? Not the retiarius for offering the helmet, nor the secutor for spurning it?”

“Well now, let me see...” Jonathan was still working out the parallels between fiction and reality. If he inferred the secutor to be Claire... “By chance, after the helmet is spurned, does the retiarius bestow it on another?”

She made a wry face. “Perhaps, in a moment of ill humor.”

That confirmed his inference. But what hand, if any, had this third party in causing the breach? “Has the other been receiving helmets all along, behind the secutor’s back?”

Claire coughed to cover a laugh. “I’m sure I’ve no reason to think so. But,” she added with a pert toss of her head, “who can say?”

Then Miss Harris had not been the cause. What had? And how serious were its effects?

Were Claire and Milstead finished, or merely at odds?

Jonathan shook his head. “I’m afraid I cannot answer your question without knowing what, precisely, was the original offense.”

She came instantly to a standstill. “I cannot tell you that.”

“Oh?” Though Jonathan remained outwardly calm, anger simmered inside him. Just what had the blackguard done, that she could not bear to speak of it? “Claire, whatever happened, upon my honor—and your brother’s, too—we shall set things aright. If you’ve been compromised, or threatened in any way?—”

“Horsefeathers, no!” She slapped a hand to her forehead. “Nothing like that! You read too many novels. The truth isn’t a bit sinister. It’s just...” Cringing, she kept her eyes hidden behind her hand. “It’s silly. You would laugh at me.”

“I would not.”

“Yes, you would.”

“No, I wouldn’t, and I refuse to squabble in this adolescent manner. I’ve no desire to force you to tell me.” Indeed, now reassured of her safety, he was pleased enough by his rival’s misstep, never mind the explanations. “But should you wish to tell me—as your friend—I promise I won’t laugh. I won’t even respond, unless you ask it of me.”

At length she lowered her hand, though without raising her eyes. She seemed about to speak when the silence was broken by the sound of approaching chatter.

“That’s Mr. Hawkins’s voice,” Jonathan whispered. “We can slip away if we hurry!”

Seizing her hand, he drew her outside and to the door of the next hovel, which stood ajar. But after peeping in, he shook his head and pulled back.

“Your sister and Talbot,” he relayed in another whisper, hastening her along to the next door. Pushing it open, he yanked her inside.

This hovel was mercifully empty. He left the door open for a modicum of light and unquestionable respectability.

Blinking as his eyes readjusted to the dim, he recognized the Summer Dining Room. Here was to be found a magnificent mosaic of Jupiter and Ganymede, prince of Troy. But Jonathan didn't even glance at it, as his gaze was fixed on Claire.

She had made straight for the piscina—a low, hexagonal stone basin in the center of the wide chamber, now empty though it would have once held an ornamental fountain. He watched as she sank abruptly onto its lip and hugged her knees to her chest.

Jonathan was alarmed, for he'd not ever seen her in such a state. He'd never beheld her divested of her ladylike graces, not even during the ordeal of last Christmas. He felt it must indicate extreme distress or her increasing comfort in his presence—or both—and could only hope it was just the latter.

Fearing to startle her, he moved slowly and silently to a corner of the room. There he settled down to wait, leaning against the wall until she was ready to talk.

He watched and waited.

She stared at the mosaic floor.

At last he heard a heavy sigh.

“He put a blanket over us both,” she said all in a rush, immediately checking herself with a weak laugh. “I know, I know, it's hardly a great liberty. Nothing to set the scandal sheets aflame. ‘Unmarried couple share blanket on innocent sleigh ride’—the horror!” Her troubled expression belied her playful tone. “In truth, I've no idea whether I had any right to feel bothered. We were courting, after all. I told myself to stop being silly and just ignore it.”

Had Jonathan felt it were wise to interject, he might have countered that it was a great

liberty and she had every right to feel bothered by such indecorum. In concert with his own judgment, the fact that Miss Harris, of all people, had found it noteworthy proved the point.

But he thought it better to remain silent. He'd promised not to respond unless asked, after all.

"As it turned out, though, I couldn't ignore it," she continued quietly. "So I thought to just nudge the blanket aside inch by inch, very discreetly, and free myself without drawing notice."

She shook her head in apparent disbelief—though whether at herself or that bouncer Milstead, he didn't know.

"Even so," she went on, "he noticed. He asked me what I was doing and why, and when I explained, at first he seemed to take it well. He said he set great store by my distress—and was mortified to have given offense, and made reference to profuse apologies, unendurable shame, and the like...but the longer he rattled on, the more he seemed to be speaking of offenses received rather than bestowed."

Once more Jonathan wanted to interject, but he held himself back.

She blew out a breath, still staring at the floor. "By way of a small excuse for his mistake, he said he'd had no idea that I was so very proper, for I'd shown no indication I was that sort of lady. Of course, now armed with the knowledge, he would happily make allowances..."

Jonathan folded his arms.

"...although he had to say, purely for the sake of candor, that my pretense of virtue had left him feeling slightly ill-used. For being no stranger to women's tricks, and

having long prided himself on resisting all our little stratagems, was he now to turn round and cast himself into my trap? In fact, given this new window into my character, he felt it might be prudent to reassess our suitability for one another...”

Jonathan ground his teeth.

“...yet after a little reflection, he believed he knew his own mind, and despite his very natural reservations—and in view of my compelling attractions—in short, I’d left him no choice but to circumvent my modesty by proposing on the spot.”

She paused, probably to catch her breath.

What was your answer? Jonathan yelled in his head.

It took everything he had to clench his jaw shut till she went on.

She cleared her throat. “Forgive me, in reciting these words I’ve realized the man who uttered them is a pompous worm. I must have noticed it when he said them—indeed, thinking back now, I remember feeling nettled—but I suppose I was only half-listening to his speech, since during the whole of it he was...”

She trailed off, rubbing her furrowed brow.

He was... what? On the sharpest of tenterhooks, his mouth dry and his jaw aching, Jonathan wondered what could possibly be coming next.

Having already rattled her with his forward behavior, disparaged her character with insinuations, and solicited her hand in perhaps the most insulting terms imaginable, to what further heights of boorishness could Milstead have aspired?

“Forgive me,” she repeated haltingly, “I’m finding this difficult to explain. For I was

about to relate my outrage that during the whole of Lord Milstead's speech, in defiance of his supposed apologies, he still had me trapped under the blanket. But as it happens...that is false. For in fact he never touched me, excepting the briefest of contact to stay my hand when he first realized I was shifting it. After that, I could have removed it at any time."

At last she looked up. And over at him.

His breath caught.

Determined to be supportive—as a friend—he somehow managed to lock his gaze on hers with a steadiness he didn't feel.

"But I left the blanket there," she mused, looking up to the thatched ceiling. Her tone had turned speculative, as though she might be talking to herself. "Though I itched to have the dratted thing off me, though I felt excruciatingly aware of and all but tortured by it, I let it be. Why did I do that? And why did I let him rattle on and on, instead of interrupting? And why didn't I refuse his offer?"

This was too much for even Jonathan's self-command, and a breathless query forced its way out. "You are engaged?"

"No." She looked back to him. "I begged time to consider my answer."

He breathed a secret sigh of relief.

"But I ought to have dismissed him outright, for in truth there's nothing to consider. If I cannot bring myself to share a blanket with the man, how could I share my life with him?" A slightly hysterical laugh bubbled out of her. "And I don't know why I lied. I've never been one to hold my tongue. Even with how I've changed since last Christmas"—a flicker in her gaze told Jonathan she meant since you left—"still, I

don't know why I shrank from him. I cannot understand myself.”

Jonathan could understand her; at least, he thought he might . For she had indeed changed. Noah had written of these changes, and Jonathan had noticed nearly as soon as he'd stepped foot in the castle.

Dampened spirits, a new restraint. A sparkle missing from her eyes.

And for those changes he blamed himself. If he'd wondered whether his actions had crushed her, now he had his answer.

And the confirmation crushed him .

The full knowledge of what he'd wrought—the damage to her tender and beautiful soul—was a heavy weight upon his own.

But worse yet, he could see how he'd paved the way for men like Milstead to inflict further damage. For Jonathan suspected the old Claire of being far too robust to interest such men: too lively for entertaining their tedious advances, too self-assured for their perseverance to whittle away her defenses. She would have tired of the pompous worm long before he got her in that sleigh. And he'd have never got the chance to trample her down with his insidious tactics and diminishing words.

Jonathan had given him that chance. With his pigheaded mistakes, he had trampled her first.

And for that he would never forgive himself.

The sight of Claire—magnificent, formidable Claire—now huddled on the edge of the low stone basin, questioning her own reason, could not but trigger an avalanche of self-reproach. He had done this to her. And he must fix it.

But how?

What could he do or say to make her whole again?

Almost as soon as he'd asked the question, his efforts to answer it were thwarted—by the sudden appearance of the pompous worm himself.

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Claire leapt to her feet when two human figures appeared in the open doorway, silhouetted against the light. The taller figure carried a top hat, while the smaller emitted a familiar, high-pitched chortle.

By the time the newcomers entered the hovel, Claire was standing placidly, hands clasped before her, her face an unsmiling mask. For a second time, the tense atmosphere snuffed out the laughter of Elizabeth's friend Mary, while seeming to have the opposite effect on her companion.

"Why, Lady Claire." Lord Milstead smirked, one eyebrow raised lecherously. "I see you've embarked on a private tour of your own."

"Begad!" Mary's eyes lit with intrigue. "And with her former fiancé!"

"Fiancé?" Lord Milstead sounded startled. "Lady Claire has been engaged before...to a duke?"

"To be sure, my lord!" Mary replied with relish. "Though I suppose I'm not surprised you haven't heard, for it all happened out here in the countryside a year ago."

He looked rather put out. "And here I'd thought her just a wallflower," he muttered crossly.

At that, Claire regarded him with new eyes.

He had indeed met her by a wall, for that was where she'd spent most of the last London season—sitting on the fringes of a great many ballrooms.

At the time she'd thought him ever gentle and patient, not to mention kind to seek her out on each and every occasion. And she'd felt guilty for wasting his time, as she was not yet up to forming any sort of attachment.

But he'd tried to set her mind at ease. He'd assured her he sought her company for his own enjoyment. And though his heart had been hers since their first meeting, he was content to wait till she was ready to receive it. His was not a wild, fleeting passion, but a strong and steady devotion, capable of weathering any delay. And until she signaled her readiness, he would not impose on her by pressing his suit.

Now it suddenly dawned on her that to be conspicuously long-suffering was just an imposition of another sort. His gentle assurances had done a work of their own: taking root in her conscience, demanding her gratitude, rushing her decision.

With their history together cast in a different light, all at once Lord Milstead was overbearing and cold-blooded rather than patient and kind. And Claire was an object of prey rather than one of compassion.

For a man seeking out wallflowers was surely after an easy mark.

At the moment, she could only wonder how close she'd come to marrying a man for whom she felt no love or even liking, but merely gratitude mistaken for affection. How fortunate he'd shown his true colors by having the bad grace to flirt with Mary in front of the whole party. If only he might transfer his attentions in truth, Claire could breathe easy!

Yet alas, she was only too wise to his real sentiments, for if he meant to conceal them, he was failing dreadfully.

While paying Mary no mind whatsoever, he glowered at Claire with indignation—and at Jonathan with pure male aggression. But mostly Claire felt a

dangerous current she suspected was driven by bruised pride.

Jonathan must have felt the danger too, for he moved to Claire's side. "Just a wallflower?" he mused. "Isn't it vexing how looks can deceive?" He eyed his rival mildly. "I daresay Lady Claire thought you a gentleman."

The man reddened. "You presume to speak for my betrothed?"

Mary's mouth dropped open.

Though touched by Jonathan's gallantry, Claire found it entirely unnecessary. Gone was the paralysis of the sleigh ride, when she'd felt unnerved, alone, and physically overmatched. Although she appreciated Jonathan's support, she wanted to speak for herself.

Accordingly, she said calmly, "I am not your betrothed, Lord Milstead. I've had time enough to consider your offer, and while I thank you for the honor, I must refuse."

Mary closed her mouth and grinned, her face shining with the joy of bearing witness to such a delicious scene.

Jonathan sent Claire a tender look of admiration. The tenderness she would have to sort out later, but for now his approval gave her the strength she needed to face Lord Milstead's wrath.

"You refuse me?" he spluttered furiously. "Why? Are you involved with Rathborne still? Explain yourself, for this is absurd!"

"No more absurd," she retorted, "than your making such a speech with another woman on your arm."

“Begad!” Mary chortled, and found herself thrown off his arm. Far from taking offense, she looked delighted by the theatrics.

“The flirtation was your own fault,” he charged Claire, “for you provoked me this morning. You’re just the same as every other female. You all sport with us as you like, then lay the consequences at our feet. No matter how deserving a fellow, no matter if he prostrates himself before you—why, months I waited for you, with nary a reproach! What more would you have of me, my lady? What more could I have possibly done to show you my regard?”

“Nothing, my lord,” Claire said evenly. “You did not lack in showing regard. You lacked in feeling it.”

He dismissed her with a wave. “I’m sure I shan’t take the trouble to understand your meaning. All nonsense, I wager, to cover your indiscretions with Rathborne. His grace should count himself lucky my pistols are at home.” Rudely turning his back, he offered Mary the return of his arm. “Madam?”

She took it readily and followed him out, exchanging a look of incongruous hilarity with Claire.

After a moment of heavy silence, Claire felt a hand on her shoulder. “That was well done,” Jonathan said.

“Was it?” Though relieved the matter was ended, she felt no satisfaction. Mostly what she felt was sore and tired from sleeping atop her writing desk.

His hand, warm on her shoulder, gave a reassuring squeeze. “I wish I had your courage.”

She turned to meet Jonathan’s gaze—just as her brother’s head materialized behind

his.

“By George!” Noah called from the doorway. “There you two are! The horses are harnessed and ready.”

When they joined the group gathered about the sleighs, one vehicle was already driving off.

“What the dickens?” Noah muttered, and moved off to consult with a groom. He soon returned and favored Claire with a sour look. “It would appear your Lord Milstead took it upon himself to drive out ahead—accompanied by Miss Harris.”

“He is not my Lord Milstead,” Claire informed her brother.

“I’m glad of that.” Noah shook his head. “He’s behaved most infamously.”

“And irregularly,” Jonathan added with a note of urgency. “Foolish though she’s been, we ought not leave Miss Harris in his power.”

“I agree,” Noah said. “I’m taking one of the grooms’ mounts to catch them. Harry is saddling her now.”

“I could go in your stead,” Jonathan offered, “should you wish to remain with your guests?—”

“I certainly do not wish that.” Through narrowed eyes, Noah watched Lady Caroline mount the foremost sleigh. When she looked round for him, he quickly turned away.

“She’s ready, milord!” Harry appeared at Noah’s elbow and handed him the reins of a dappled mare.

“Thank you, Harry. You’ll drive Lady Caroline?”

The groom bowed and headed off as Noah began to mount up.

“Mind yourself,” Claire advised him, patting the horse’s neck. “Lord Milstead is in a temper.”

“It’s he who should mind my temper,” Noah said darkly. “I’ll see you back at the castle, with Miss Harris in tow. Milstead, I fear, may be called away on urgent business. A pity he shall miss the Christmas festivities.”

As he rode off, Claire turned back to survey her guests. On finding them all settled in their sleighs, ready to depart, she had naught to do but to climb into her own seat. Having both been slighted by their original driving companions, she and Jonathan were obliged to claim the last vacant sleigh for themselves (not that she minded).

When he handed her up, she felt exceedingly aware of his fingers clasping hers, even through the thick protection of their gloves. Now she recalled that, just before Noah’s interruption in the hovel, she’d had something she’d wanted to say to Jonathan. But she couldn’t remember the details.

Her thoughts seemed washed away by a swell of fatigue. Willing her eyes to stay open, she sank onto her seat with a languid sigh and pulled a blanket over her lap.

The blanket pulled back—Jonathan had seized the same one. They shared an awkward laugh, both recalling Claire’s troubles with the earlier blanket. Relinquishing his hold, Jonathan began to rummage for another.

But he searched in vain, and a peculiar tension grew the longer he hunted, till Claire felt she should offer hers. Of course he graciously declined, and Claire’s well-bred politeness made her insist, and they went round in this manner for some time before

she was on the point of acknowledging the inevitable: They would have to share the blanket.

Once she'd mentally accepted that solution, she began to fancy it. And that's when he discovered, at long last, the second blanket.

Thus settled in their respective places, under their separate blankets, they both stared straight ahead as the sleighs moved off. And before her weary mind could grasp the threads of what she'd wanted to tell him, Claire was asleep.

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As Jonathan drove back to Greystone, the sun began to dip, casting long shadows over the countryside. A sharp drop in temperature made Claire shiver in her sleep. Jonathan removed his blanket and threw it over hers, and the shivering ceased. Her head lolling onto his shoulder, she slept on.

Jonathan watched her face, glad she looked peaceful, and also glad that (at least for now) she was in his safe hands.

While she'd done an admirable job of banishing Milstead, there were plenty more men like him—and if in the end she banished Jonathan too, he feared he might end up in a state of constant anxiety. For though she'd grown strong enough to take care of herself again, he couldn't bear to think of her being mistreated.

Somewhere in the course of these bleak musings, he fell asleep himself, and woke to the clatter of the sleigh upon the drawbridge. As the stablemaster had predicted, Serenity had done well for them, carrying them home in spite of the unconscious state of her driver—for which Jonathan could only feel immensely grateful and vastly foolish.

There were two other circumstances for which he was grateful: the first being their sleigh's position at the rear of the convoy, and the second, the absence of Miss Harris's watchful eye. For when Jonathan came to, he found his arm around Claire's shoulders and her head tucked under his chin—an arrangement which, had she observed it, Miss Harris would have found tremendously interesting.

But it appeared that in her absence, no one had bothered to look. And when Claire awakened within seconds of Jonathan and blinked up at him sleepily, their faces

scarcely inches apart, she graced him with a smile of the deepest contentment before their arrival in the carriage sweep forced them to spring apart.

Though a footman materialized to assist the lady, Jonathan insisted on handing her down himself. If, after Claire descended, their fingers remained linked rather longer than was necessary—and if, as another footman approached with a tray, the two of them remained rather closer than was seemly—nobody seemed to notice or mind.

They each accepted a mug full of something that steamed and smelled of Christmas. Jonathan raised his cup to her, and they clinked in a silent toast full of unspoken significance. He held her gaze as he drank deeply. With a good deal of spice and a delicious heat, the drink thawed him from the inside out. Quickly he drained the whole mug.

Claire grinned to see him reaching for another. “You like the wassail?”

“I demand the recipe.” He clinked his second cup with hers.

She laughed and sipped. “I’m afraid it’s a family recipe, from my mother’s side.” Her smile went lopsided. “Only to be shared among ourselves, you know.”

“Ah. That does present a difficulty.” Feigning contemplation, he rubbed his cheek, then his chin. “If only one could join this very exclusive, secretive family...”

“An interesting thought. I suppose there might be one way. But you may have to—horsefeathers!”

“Pardon?” Laughing, Jonathan paused in scratching his chin. “I may have to horsefeathers?” What on earth?—”

“Jonathan!”

“What? Is something amiss?”

“Your face! It’s all red and—” She broke off, her own face turning white.

“Is it? Probably chapped from the wind.” Absently he searched for a place to set his cup—until she snatched it from his hand. “Oh—er—thank you. I just must reach this spot on my elbow...” And slipping one hand up the opposite coat sleeve, he began to scratch furiously.

“I think you should sit down,” she said in a tremulous voice.

Though now distracted by an itch inside his waistcoat, he observed her in some alarm. “Perhaps you should sit down; you look distraught! May I ask—oh—confound it?—”

In fumbling with a waistcoat button, he caught sight of his hands—the backs of which were covered with angry red splotches. Though new itches continued erupting all over his body, he suddenly couldn’t attend to a single one.

Slowly, his gaze moved from his hands up to her guilt-ridden face. “Claire,” he said with deadly control, “did you have citrus added to this wassail?”

“No!” she cried. “I mean, yes, there’s orange in the recipe, but—argh!” In her frenzy, she’d splashed all the remaining wassail down her front.

Tetchily he offered a handkerchief. “I don’t understand how you could do something like this.”

“I didn’t! That is, I didn’t mean—” Appearing near tears as she frantically searched for a place to deposit the cups, she finally dumped them in the snow and, snatching the handkerchief, began to mop her dress.

“If you’re saying you meant to call it off,” he continued with mounting severity, “the fact that you planned such a cruel trick in the first place makes me?—”

“It was never one of our tricks, I swear! It’s a mistake! Monsieur Laurent was to make you a special batch without any orange. I don’t know how he failed to—oh!” She crumpled the handkerchief in her fist. “Oh, no. Oh, piffle, it was my fault! I cancelled your special menu, but I forgot to specify...” She trailed off into an anguished groan. “I’m so sorry, Jonathan.”

“I see,” he said, though he didn’t, since he couldn’t comprehend her muddled account. But he thought he’d caught the gist. “If you say it was a mistake, I believe you. I very happily believe you, for I was beginning to fear you’d raised my hopes solely to enhance the thrashing...”

She shook her head fervently. “I’ll explain later, but first we must fetch a physician.”

“Dot decessary.” Ah, here was the congestion setting in. And now that his mental distress had eased, his awareness of the physical distress was magnified. He began to scratch wildly. “I’ll be all right id ad hour or two—here—give me dat?—”

Snatching back the wine-stained handkerchief, he blew his nose fiercely.

A sudden thundering of hooves drew their attention to the barbican. Jonathan was puzzled to see naught but a one-horse sleigh pass beneath it—until a chaise-and-four followed behind. A chaise-and-four that Jonathan, with a sinking heart, instantly recognized.

When the sleigh came to a halt, Noah leapt out. “Good Lord, Rathborne, what happened to your face?”

“Chapped by the wind,” Claire answered promptly. “Where is Lord Milstead?”

Noah's lip curled. "His lordship wisely chose to await his baggage at the stables." He offered a hand to help Miss Harris dismount.

Jonathan briefly wondered what Noah had done to the villain. It must have been quite the spectacle, for Miss Harris looked fit to burst.

"And then we met with an unexpected traveler," Noah went on, "just up the road." His eyes strayed to Jonathan. "Rathborne, have you invited?—"

"My mother?" Jonathan turned a stony gaze on Claire. "I most certainly have not."

In bewilderment Noah looked to his sister. "Claire?"

She scowled back at them both. "It wasn't me!"

"Sure it wasn't," Jonathan said evenly. "Just as it wasn't you who poisoned me, starved me, or stole my clothes."

Noah bristled. "What's all this, Claire?"

She stayed him with a raised hand. "Jonathan, I?—"

"It's all right, Claire. Truly. It was no more than I deserved." Jonathan turned on his heel and stalked into the castle.

"Wait!" she called after him, but he was already gaining the entrance hall. From the commotion behind him, he gathered Claire would not be following—not until she'd satisfied her brother, in any event.

By then Jonathan hoped to be safe behind the locked door of his chamber. He would pack up (what remained of) his belongings, order his carriage, and leave this

madhouse for good.

Great hurry that he was in, it was no surprise when he tripped and fell on the upstairs landing. Rubbing a banged (and itchy) elbow, he looked to see what had obstructed his path. It appeared someone had dropped a book in the middle of the corridor.

A rather battered and ink-stained book.

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“ M y dear Lord Greystone!”

When the sing-song greeting reached their ears, both Noah and Claire froze, his hand still gripping her arm. Their furious argument ended abruptly. They looked round in trepidation, having both forgotten the matter of their uninvited guest.

But the lady was nowhere to be seen—until Claire at last caught sight of a delicate gloved hand wiggling its fingers inside the chaise. At the same time, a dog began yapping.

Claire signaled a footman, who sprang into action. Finally shaking off her brother, she straightened her clothing and moved forward to receive the duchess. As Noah joined her, she realized most of their guests were also gathered round, having observed the siblings’ tussle with avid interest.

Mary was in her element.

The footman lowered the chaise’s steps, and the Duchess of Rathborne seemingly floated down them.

Beneath her fur-lined velvet cloak, she was magnificently attired in red and gold silk—rather too magnificently for traveling, though perhaps not for barging into a Christmas party. As always, under one arm she carried a Pomeranian as immaculately groomed as his mistress. Today the little dog wore a collar of rubies and diamonds matched to those the duchess was wearing.

“Your grace,” Noah said, bowing over her small hand. “I beg pardon for my shameful

neglect.”

“Tiens, you must not think of it!” she replied in her breathy French accent. “I’m sure if poor Rousseau”—she scratched the Pomeranian’s ears—“were not so very thirsty, I should not mind sitting out in the cold and damp as long as you please.”

To this pointed remark Noah could only respond by inviting the trespasser inside. Sending Mr. Evans off for a dish of water (pursued by her grace’s directive that Rousseau drank only green tea), he offered the duchess his arm.

Claire and the company of eager spectators followed close on their heels. As everyone swarmed through the entrance hall, three footmen vanished beneath mounds of shedded outerwear.

Noah led her grace into the saloon, talking indifferently of weather and roads until he’d got her installed by the fire, with her dog at her feet daintily lapping Imperial Hyson Tea. Then he fell pensively silent, and Claire guessed he was scouring his memory for an acceptable way to ask a duchess what on earth she was doing in his house.

Thankfully, her grace spared him the trouble. “You’ve proved so very kind, my Lord Greystone, that I know you shall be only too happy to oblige my wish of visiting with my son.”

“Oh! I see. Yes, well...”—Noah threw Claire a look of panic—“I believe the duke is rather indisposed”—her grace scowled, and he swallowed hard—“but naturally, I’m at your service!” He rose. “I shall fetch him at once.”

The scowl transformed into a serene smile. “So very kind!” she repeated.

In his haste to escape, Noah nearly collided with Mr. Evans in the doorway.

“Begging your lordship’s pardon,” the butler said with ruffled dignity, “but may I venture to apprise you of the time?”

“The time? Oh, blast, it’s time for us all to dress!”

As everyone began reluctantly filing out, and Noah scurried off to his task, Claire realized, with dawning horror, that she was about to be alone with the duchess. For it was unthinkable to leave such a distinguished guest unattended, and as Greystone’s mistress, the duty of staying behind must fall to her.

In vain she sought Elizabeth’s eye in order to plead for assistance. But her sister was either lost in contemplation or pretending to be, for she quit the room without a backward glance.

Claire could only hope Noah would return quickly—and with a stout heart in his chest. She feared her grace might not accept the inevitable rejection with anything even close to (actual) grace, and indeed, might try something drastic to get her own way.

She would not succeed, however, in Claire’s estimation—even should Noah’s resolution falter—for as Claire knew all too well, pigs would fly before Jonathan came within spitting distance of his mother.

In fact, odds were Jonathan had already left Greystone. And, believing what he did of Claire, he’d probably never again come within her spitting distance, either. She would never get the chance to argue her innocence—which was just as well, since she hadn’t a clue what she could possibly say to convince him of it.

“Will you be needing anything, my lady?”

“Hmm?” The query drawing her from her reverie, Claire looked to Mr. Evans—her

last remaining ally, as everyone else had gone. Though his expression betrayed no telltale sentiment, Claire knew the old butler well enough to perceive his concern for her.

Feeling touched, she managed a small smile. “Thank you, Mr. Evans, but I would not for the world keep you from your dinner preparations.”

He hesitated. “Are you certain?”

She squared her shoulders. “Quite certain.”

While he would never be so undignified as to wink, she detected an approving twinkle in his eye. “Very well, my lady.” He bowed and went out—though decidedly leaving the door open, as if to accord her the option of shouting for help.

Then Claire had nothing left to do but to go and settle herself in the wingback chair opposite her grace’s. Claire folded her hands primly in her lap and, as Jonathan’s mother continued staring into the fire, took a few moments to survey her opponent. But as she studied the dance of light and shadow upon the formidable face—throwing every droop and crease into sharp relief, making the duchess appear ten years older than she had last Christmas—she realized she felt no animosity toward this woman.

Her quarrel had never been with the duchess and her bad behavior, but with Jonathan and his .

Whatever the duchess’s reasons for interfering in her son’s affairs—whether she’d taken some dislike to Claire or simply feared losing her own place in his heart—Claire could not but pity her. To have gone to such lengths and concocted such schemes spoke of a desperation one could only attribute, having seen mother and son together, to the deepest love.

A love misapplied, of course, and disastrously so. But after the events of the past year—and especially the past days—Claire fancied she now knew a bit about love and desperation, and indeed, schemes and mistakes. And if all that had come about for love of a man she'd kept company with for but a few months, what might a mother's love drive her to?

Claire might have passed all her time with the duchess in such charitable reflections, had she not felt the absolute necessity of saying something. Resolved on keeping to the most banal of civilities, she began with: "I hope you left your mother in good health."

Only upon her grace's astonished reaction did Claire realize the inflammatory potential of her remark—given that when they'd last parted, the duchess was allegedly en route to her mother's deathbed. She wished immediately to recant, but knew not how.

Before responding, her grace lifted the little Pomeranian onto her lap and began to stroke its back. "The marquise is in a tolerable way, considering." When her gaze returned to Claire, her eyes were wide and round with concern. "I only pray, *ma mie*, the same can be said of yourself! You appear to have suffered some sort of accident, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Claire followed the duchess's pointed look down to the large, wine-colored stain on her gown. "Oh! Yes, an accident. I am honored by your grace's compassion, but I have suffered no injury. It's only spilled wine."

"*Bien sûr!* Forgive me, I did not realize the English *mademoiselles* engaged in such, ah, spirited modes of celebration."

"Oh, no," Claire protested, blushing deeply. "I'm not 'spirited' at all! I've barely had a sip! The spill only happened because?—"

“ Ma mie ,” she interrupted with smothering generosity, “there is no need for embarrassment. Do not imagine me to be censuring you, for I am quite sure you are beyond reproach! The mistake is all mine. Unsociable as I am, I’ve become woefully ignorant of the general conduct of young ladies. I fear,” she concluded, her eyes hard, though her voice lost none of its sickly sweetness, “I am only familiar with the conduct befitting a Duchess of Rathborne.”

Claire could hardly fail to understand the rebuke, but its style of delivery left her equally unable to offer any defense or, indeed, to say anything at all. Instead she merely blushed deeper and quailed beneath the duchess’s withering glare.

After a few seconds of excruciating silence, broken only by the whisper of fingernails upon fur, Claire was ready to expire on the spot—and might have done, if not for the timely entrance of her rescuer.

“Noah!” she greeted him with undisguised relief—but the tall and reassuringly solid figure striding into the room was not her brother’s. “Jonathan?” she gasped. “What are you doing here?”

“I believe I was summoned,” he answered coolly and came to stand beside her.

She found that reassuring, as well as the return of his normal coloring. But with a sinking heart, she also noted he’d brought with him a leather satchel and an impatient air, and his eyes, resting on her but briefly, still flashed with anger.

“Summoned,” he went on, “it would seem, to engage in a discussion of conduct befitting a Duchess of Rathborne. Have I got that right, maman ?”

Upon seeing her son for the first time in nearly a year, the duchess was too overwhelmed for concealment. Claire watched her drink him in, everything she felt laid bare upon her face: hurt, indignation, even fury.

But these were mere whitecaps atop an ocean of longing.

Claire could see a palpable desire to leap from her chair and scoop her child into her arms, along with a tremble of fear or of weakness, as if she were already expecting him to leave again. Though her well-bred restraint compelled her to keep her seat and continue stroking Rousseau, whom she clung to like a life preserver, she seemed unable to marshal her powers of speech.

Fortunately, Jonathan didn't wait for an answer. "Perhaps you haven't considered," he went on, "that as the Duke of Rathborne, I should have the final say on this matter. And in my present humor I find it more appropriate to discuss conduct unbecoming a duchess of my house." Claire noticed his jaw tighten. "For instance, barging into an acquaintance's castle, ordering him about your errands, and being rude to his sister; is this the sort of behavior I ought to expect and condone?"

His mother was stung into a reply. "What other choice did I have?" she cried. "You refused to see me!"

"I beg your pardon," he said coldly, "but you had the choice to leave me alone and respect my wishes—which I made quite clear."

"You made nothing clear! Voyons , you vanished without a word—no idea where you went, when you were coming home, why you left?"

"Why? You dare ask why , after what you did?" He laughed without a shred of humor. "If ruining my wedding—three times!—wasn't enough, perhaps we might add in the repeated lies, the dragging me to another country under false pretenses, and oh, let's not forget locking me in a closet?"

"It was a dressing room!" she protested. "And I did not lock you in, merely took advantage of a f-fortunate...accident..."

She trailed off, evidently realizing (based on her son's thunderous expression) this line of argument would get her nowhere.

“ Mon coeur ,” she began again, “I know I went too far at times. But you must understand I did the best I could with what means were available. I desired only to help you, to save you from an ill-considered marriage.”

“What could possibly be ill-considered about Claire? An earl's daughter from an irreproachable line!”

“It is not her family I object to—just look at her! Look at her dress, her hair...”

When they both wheeled round to do so, Claire discovered it was impossible to die from embarrassment, for otherwise she would surely have perished. Which might have been preferable to enduring them watch her awkwardly pat her windswept hair and try (and fail) to cover her stained gown.

Contempt deepened the lines around her grace's mouth. “These English girls,” she muttered. “I'd hoped to introduce you to some suitable young women during our time in France, mon coeur , that you might see what is lacking here. No élégance , no dignité , no humilité . Nothing but vulgar Protestant pride! I'm sure Lady Claire is a nice enough girl, but she will not make you a good wife. She is too willful, too strong-minded to be ruled by her husband as she ought. She will never learn her place.”

By this time, tears—of shame or rage, she didn't know which—were beginning to prick Claire's eyes, and she felt the need to escape before she either lost her temper or broke down in sobs.

She rose from her chair.

Then stopped dead upon hearing Jonathan's next words.

“You're right, maman .”

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S hock knocked Claire back into her seat.

Even in her darkest imaginings, Jonathan had never spoken to her so cruelly, nor rejected her so completely. Did he hate her so much? In a daze of hurt and confusion, she sought his gaze—but what she saw there only confused her further.

It wasn't contempt...nor was it contrition.

His lips were quirked in a tiny smile, and his shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter. Claire was dumbfounded. Was he laughing at her and her English vulgarity?

But then he registered the look on her face, and contrition arrived.

“That is,” he faltered, turning the laugh into a cough, “you’re right about one thing, maman . One big thing.”

Though Jonathan was addressing his mother, he was watching Claire.

“As to everything else, maman , you couldn't be more wrong. No elegance, no dignity? If you had seen how Claire acquitted herself this day, you'd never say so again. Of humility, I only worry she has rather too much. And as for how she looks...” His gaze raked her from top to toe. “She's more beautiful every time I see her.”

The duchess made a scornful noise. Still confused, Claire frowned, though her swelling heart had begun to crowd the breath from her lungs.

“But you did get something right, maman . You saw Claire’s pride, and her will, and her strength. I suspect she has more strength in her little finger than I have in my whole body. And that’s why I need her to be my wife. Her strength makes me stronger; strong enough to be the man I ought to be. I hope you’re right, as well, that she’ll never be ruled by her husband, for I shall depend upon her to tell me when I do wrong, and never ‘learn her place,’ excepting her place at my side.”

“I cannot believe what I am hearing!” Her grace’s voice rose in pitch. “After all this time, you cannot still mean to marry this—this disgracieux ?—”

“Maman!” At last Jonathan looked away from Claire, turning scorching eyes on his mother. “If you desire to ever see me again, you will not complete that sentence.”

“You intend we should see each other again?” She leaned forward, reaching for him. “We’ll go back to the way things were?”

He recoiled from her, raising the satchel like a shield. “No! We can never go back.” Though she looked crushed, he set his jaw and pressed on. “Things will have to be different, maman. Since I cannot trust you, I must keep you out of my affairs. I’ll tolerate no meddling and certainly no abuse of my wi—of Claire, whether or not she agrees to marry me?—”

“Yes!” Claire burst out heedlessly. “Yes, I’ll marry you!”

She was as surprised those words had come out of her mouth as he looked to hear them.

But as she rose to stand beside him, she felt no regret. Only joy.

“Well!” Grinning from ear to ear, he at last discarded his satchel and took her hand, raising it to his lips for a soft kiss. Then, lacing his fingers with hers, he turned back

to his mother and regained his stern countenance. “There you have it. Er—where was I?”

“You shall tolerate no abuse of your wife,” Claire put in helpfully.

“Right.” He cleared his throat. “That means no treating Claire poorly, no scheming to undermine her, no slandering her about the neighborhood or in society. If you cannot put aside your prejudices and be a gracious mother-in-law, I’ll turn my back on you forever. Have I made myself clear?”

By the end of his speech, the duchess’s mouth hung open in a most uncouth fashion. “And this is how you speak to your maman?” she demanded, her pitch rising even higher. “To the woman who brought you into this world, and raised you, and sacrificed her whole life for you?”

Claire felt Jonathan stiffen beside her. She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

As he squeezed back, she felt his tension begin to ease.

“Since before I can remember,” he said at length, in a firm, quiet tone, “I’ve heard all about these great sacrifices you made out of love for me, how you set aside your own needs and lived for mine alone. But you decided that for yourself, maman. I was just a child and had no say in the matter. And I’m tired of living under the burden of this debt, which I never asked for and can never hope to repay.”

“I see.” Slowly her grace rose, tucking her dog under one arm. “I am nothing more than a burden to you now. I shall leave you, then, for you’ll be happier without me.”

She turned to go, though in a rather dawdling manner, as though expecting to be stopped. When Jonathan moved to block her exit, she shot him a satisfied look—which dropped straight off her face as she realized he’d only been reaching for

the bell pull.

The butler appeared so promptly, Claire surmised he'd been listening at the door.

“Mr. Evans,” Jonathan said, “the duchess is ready to depart. Would you please order her carriage?”

“I took the liberty of doing so several minutes ago.” Mr. Evans turned to the lady with a bow. “Your grace’s carriage is ready.”

Though the duchess greeted this declaration with visible astonishment (and horror), she could only allow the butler to lead her away.

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Quietly holding hands, Claire and Jonathan stared at the door long after his mother had disappeared behind it.

Claire was first to break the silence. “You were right,” she said with a rueful sigh. “She didn’t listen to a word you said.”

“Perhaps.” Jonathan shrugged “But she knows the terms on which I’ll welcome her back into my life, should she ever decide to meet them.” He looked down at Claire. “In any event, I am glad to have said my piece. And for that, I have you to thank.”

She gazed steadily up at him. “I’m still in shock that you’re here. Dead set as you were against seeing her—la, was it only yesterday?” She shook her head in wonder. “What made you change your mind?”

Looking rather discomfited, he released her hand. “To own the truth...”

When he collected his satchel and pulled a familiar book from inside, she felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. “Where did you find that?”

“Fallen in the upstairs corridor,” he said sheepishly.

“Horsefeathers! And you...you read it?”

He nodded. “Are you angry?”

“I...no—yes—I don’t know. I’m mortified. I never meant anybody to read—let alone you —” She gulped. “The things I wrote about you were not very kind?—”

“Yet not unjust!” A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I particularly enjoyed the inspired nickname?—”

“Don’t say it!” Claire was torn between dissolving in laughter and hiding behind the sofa. “Please! It’s all Elizabeth’s fault, you know.”

“I do know. And I can’t blame her one bit. If a man behaves like a Ratbag?—”

“I said don’t say it!” Claire cuffed him on the shoulder, though she couldn’t quite suppress a smile. “When I wrote those things I was confused, to say the least. I didn’t know my own heart. You’re not to take any of it seriously.”

He sobered. “I think you did know your heart—or at least, your pen did, for it was evident in every word on the page. Your heart’s nobility and generosity, its eagerness to give love—if only the object of that love could offer the smallest proof of his worthiness.” He took her hands. “I cannot but take your writing seriously, for it showed me how wrong I was to doubt you for even a moment. It brought me from despair to hope.” His eyes implored her. “Still, I know I shouldn’t have read your private words. Can you forgive me? I’ve already thought of a way to even the score.”

“Oh?”

She was mystified to see him reach once more into the satchel, producing a sheaf of letters tied with string. “I settled it with Noah when we met each other on the stairs.”

“What’s Noah got to do with anything?”

Jonathan pressed the bundle into her hands. “This is our correspondence of the past year—Noah’s letters to me, and mine to him. He gave me permission to share them with you. And I think it’s important that you read them.”

“Very well.” When he just continued to look at her, she raised a brow. “You mean right now?”

He nodded.

“What about dinner? We must change, and?—”

“Forget dinner. Noah can host tonight. Or Elizabeth. I’ll ask Mr. Evans to set up a private table in the library.”

“How irregular!” she said on a laugh, though she didn’t dislike the idea.

She and Jonathan had never dined alone before.

“I don’t care if it’s irregular. It’s Christmas Eve, and I should like to have my fiancée to myself.”

That settled, Jonathan left to make the arrangements while Claire sat by the fire and read the letters.

The first was from Jonathan to Noah, written in the sparse style that was typical between gentlemen, to inform his friend he was embarking on a Grand Tour. Short though it was, Claire could read Jonathan’s melancholy between the handful of lines. And so did Noah, evidently, for his reply was banal excepting one pointed reference to how famously Claire had been getting on—an obvious effort to throw cold water over any lingering hopes.

Ha! she chortled to herself. Well done, Noah!

He may have told a bald-faced lie—for at the time the letter had been penned in mid-January, Claire had scarcely left her room—but it was exactly what she would have

wanted him to say of her.

Perhaps Noah wasn't the very worst of brothers, after all.

The bulk of the correspondence continued in this manner. Jonathan's letters were invariably wan, while Noah's were oddly focused on his middle sister—the many friends she'd gone to stay with, dance floors she'd graced, suitors she'd rejected, and so forth—all fictitious, of course. Claire was touched to see how staunchly her brother had safeguarded her pride.

But the final exchange brought about a sea change. When she looked at Noah's last letter, the date immediately caught her eye:

12th November 1819

Claire's birthday. She remembered her family had marked the day with a dinner party including all of Monsieur Laurent's best prawn dishes and all of Claire's favorite people: her siblings, her Cainewood cousins...and, unexpectedly, Lord Milstead. Having paid a call that morning on his way through the neighborhood, he'd been only too delighted to join the family celebration.

The remainder of Noah's letter proceeded as follows:

Caro amico,

Forgive the abrupt style of this message; I fear there isn't time for pleasantries. I must own I have not been entirely candid with you. Though Claire bears up admirably, the truth is that she's in a bad way. It's not mine to divulge the particulars, but I believe she's about to make a terrible mistake, and unfortunately I haven't enough credit with her to prevent it. You, on the other hand, may yet hold some sway. If you care for her still, I beg you to come to us in all haste—although, even should you leave directly, I

suppose the journey could hardly be completed before the new year. It may already be too late.

Though I do hope you'll come, in the spirit of our long friendship, let me end with a word of caution?—

If you hurt my sister again, it will be out of my power to avoid meeting you at dawn.

Yours etc,

Greystone

Jonathan's reply was a nearly illegible scrawl.

Rome, Italy

1st December 1819

My good man,

Count on me by Christmas.

Rathborne

“Still reading?”

Jumping in surprise, Claire looked up to find Jonathan before her. “I've just finished.”

“And?”

“I’m glad you showed them to me. Thank you.” Sighing, she leaned back in her chair. “I suppose I shall have to thank Noah, too, eventually...after I’ve boxed his ears for keeping me in the dark.”

Jonathan smiled crookedly. “His methods may have been a bit underhanded, but I daresay he had your best interests at heart.”

“Yes, yes,” she said, flapping her hands at Jonathan. “You’ve made your point. I’ll make friends with him again, never fear.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Catching one of her hands, he drew her to her feet. “May I escort you in to dinner, madam?”

She didn’t answer right away, for she’d found herself quite close to him. Close enough for his body to fill her vision.

His impeccably tailored suit revealed the width of his shoulders, the solidity of his form. Her eyes were level with his mouth, its contours emphasized in the play of the firelight.

Gazing up into his face for a moment—or an hour—she could not but marvel at the miracle of having him here.

Was this real?

After all this time, was he truly hers?

On impulse (and heedless of the public setting), she went on tiptoe and touched her lips to his. She saw the flash of surprise in his eyes before they drifted closed.

Though this was not their first kiss, she’d never been the instigator before. She liked

the feeling of power it gave her. And when he pulled her flush against him and deepened the kiss, she equally liked how it felt ceding that power to him.

When she was ready to take it back, she freed her arms so she could bury her hands in his hair, that thick, silky mass more luscious than any woman's.

With a strangled laugh, he broke away. "Confound it," he groaned, holding her at arm's length as he caught his breath. "Are you trying to make me duel your brother?"

"Oh, dear! I've made you all ruffled..." She reached up to smooth his disheveled mane.

"Don't!" He leapt away from her.

"Sorry!"

"No, I'm sorry!" Looking foolish, he dragged his own hand through his hair—which only made it look worse. "But if you do that again, I'm not certain of keeping my wits about me."

She flushed with pleasure. Too giddy to form a proper response, she settled for silently directing him to a looking glass. While he stood before it to repair the damage, she stationed herself behind him.

"I've wanted to touch your hair," she found herself confessing, "ever since I first saw you. Imagine my regret all this past year that I'd never done it when I had the chance..."

A low chuckle escaped his lips. "Was it worth the wait?"

She nodded seriously. "But if you don't like it?—"

“Claire, stop,” he growled in that way that made her shiver. “You have my permission, or rather my encouragement, to touch my hair as often as you’d like—the very instant we are married.”

She caught his eye in the mirror. “And when might that be?”

“Just as soon as you like.” He grinned, slightly abashed. “Don’t think me overbold, but as soon as we landed in Dover, I put Andrews on the stage to Canterbury...”

Claire half-gasped, half-laughed. “That is bold! Were you so sure of succeeding with me?”

“Not at all! But I was sure if I did succeed, and any legal niceties sprang up to hamper us, I’d go stark-raving mad.”

“As would I,” Claire said fervently. “Have you had word from him?”

“I have not.” His hair back in order, Jonathan turned from the mirror to offer his arm. “But if he isn’t at Twineham by now, with the special license in hand, I should be very much surprised.”

Claire took the arm. Now she was grinning too, so wide her cheeks began to hurt. “We could leave the party a day early,” she ventured, “and ride to Twineham Park on Sunday...”

“To wed on Monday? Won’t you mind shirking your hostess duties?”

“Elizabeth can step into the breach.” Claire breathed a happy sigh as they set off for the library. “It’ll be her job soon enough.”

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Jonathan and Claire enjoyed a long, languid, and thoroughly delightful dîner à deux , spent chiefly in catching one another up on the past year and how they'd each frittered it away in pining for the other. They lingered over the final course, heedless of the poor footmen growing old at their posts, until a noise of distant revelry burst their private bubble.

When they quit the library, the sounds grew more distinct. Raucous laughter, clinking glassware, and off-key snatches of Hark the Herald wafted down the corridor, all emanating from the drawing room.

Somebody had left the door ajar, as though to set a trap. When the two lovers were so foolish as to peep inside, they found themselves immediately seized and beset by hearty handshakes, hugs, kisses, and congratulations. Then, before they could escape, they were furnished with eggnog and made to stay and have a wonderful time.

Caroling was followed by charades and then a call for snap-dragon, the unaccountably popular game of snatching raisins from a bowl of flaming brandy. While the others singed their fingers, Jonathan and Claire (protesting she came by more than enough burns in her workshop) sat down to a nice, safe round of whist with the Cainewoods. The two couples got on famously, and by the end of the set Jonathan was on Christian-name terms with Rachael and Griffin—who would soon be his siblings, he was elated to realize. All his life he'd wished for siblings.

But family relations were not always so easy, as Jonathan well knew. Though the engagement was toasted again and again, one Chase made a point of excluding herself, declaring she would withhold her felicitations until the marriage was actually accomplished. Though at first taking Elizabeth's declaration in good humor, Jonathan

could not but wonder—as the evening wore on and she remained stubbornly aloof—if her hostility toward him would fade, or if she might never accept him as a brother.

Noah, by contrast, seemed twice as thrilled as everyone else—even when, fortified by eggnog, Claire scolded him for hiding his correspondence with Jonathan.

“It was wrong of me, I know,” he admitted with a good grace. “I’m sorry for deceiving you, though at the time I imagined myself to be protecting you. I thought you needed space to heal, an interval to forget. Yet as time went by, and you both seemed more miserable, not less...”

She let him continue apologizing for a while, then brought Rachael in to heap on more abuse, before forgiving him at last.

But no sooner were Noah and Claire at peace than Rachael began to look troubled, even shedding a tear over the year Claire and Jonathan had lost. As Griffin led her away to calm down, her two siblings looked on in astonishment, then spent several minutes debating what had prompted such un-Rachael-like behavior.

Claire concluded she was feeling guilty for having gone off to Cainewood, leaving her hapless brother and sisters to muck about in their folly.

Noah concluded she was with child again.

Whatever the true cause, its effects were realized as the party began to break up. When Rachael embraced her sister and wished her brother-to-be a good night, her eyes grew damp again. “You two have been through so much,” she said tremulously, “and it’s all my fault! If I’d been here to manage things properly...” She sniffled. “But what’s done is done, as Griffin keeps telling me?—”

“To very little effect.” Griffin offered her a handkerchief.

“—and you’re together now; that’s the important thing.” Rachael blew her nose. “I hope you won’t waste any more time. Not a single day! You plan to marry soon?”

“Very soon,” Claire said soothingly. “We’ve already got a new special license?—”

“Have you, indeed? Then why not wed tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow!” Claire’s gaze flew to Jonathan’s. “I—well—I’ve no objection, but...”

“Nor have I!” Jonathan assured her. “Only I’m not sure it’s possible. The license is at Twineham Park, thirty miles away.”

“Unless it’s still on the road from Canterbury,” Claire reminded him. “And then there’s the problem of the vicar, who refused to marry us on Christmas Day last year—and it’s too late to find somebody else this time?—”

“Leave all that to me,” Rachael said, her spirits suddenly improved. “I can manage the vicar. And you”—turning to Jonathan—“send your coachman to fetch the license. If he leaves now for Twineham, he should easily return by morning.”

“That’s true.” Jonathan hesitated. “But even so...”

Griffin touched his wife’s hand. “Is it worth the trouble, my love? Whether they marry tomorrow or next week, what’s the difference?”

Rachael drew herself up. “Not—a—single—day!” she repeated emphatically, imperious eyes rounding on her husband. “Now accompany me upstairs, for I need to be sick.”

With dignified haste she withdrew, Griffin following in her wake.

Jonathan raised his brows at Claire. “Do you suppose Noah was right?”

She lifted her chin. “I’d say we both were. But don’t tell him yet, if you please. He’ll be insufferable.”

“Your wish is my command.”

She looked pleased by the notion. “In that case, here’s my next command: Would you be a dear and humor my sister by sending for the license?”

“I will. Though I hope you won’t raise your hopes too much, in case there’s been some delay.”

“La,” she said, tossing her hair, “if we have to postpone it won’t be the first time.”

Though he knew she spoke in jest, her words still touched a nerve. The thought of disappointing her again made him grind his teeth. Draining the last of his eggnog and plonking down the mug, he resolved to do everything in his power to see this wedding through.

Starting now.

“I’ll bid you good night,” he said, taking Claire’s hands, “and be off to find my coachman.” Though he wasn’t superstitious, he was mentally crossing his fingers. “You should get some sleep. Oh, we almost forgot about the ring! I must send along a note to authorize my butler’s opening the lockbox. That’s easily done, at any rate.” He brushed a kiss over her knuckles before turning to go. “Sweet dreams, my love.”

“Jonathan,” she called after him, “about the ring...”

He looked back to her. “Yes?”

“I—” She glanced away, twisting a pearl ring on her finger. “Well, you know how very particular I am about jewelry, being as I am a jeweler, and all.”

He crossed his arms. “I do.”

“And I adore your grandmother’s ring! It’s lovely, and the family association is so special.”

“I’m glad.” He waited.

She bit her lip. “It’s just that—um, the diamonds are a...an old-fashioned rose cut—a-and the design—it’s not quite got the—um?—”

“You hate it.”

“Yes, I hate it!” She hid her face in her hands. “I’m so sorry! How dreadful am I? It’s just not at all suited to my taste—though I’m sure it looked wonderful on your grandmother!—and well, the setting is really not?—”

“Claire, stop!” Laughing heartily, he tugged on her wrists. “It’s all right. I don’t care what ring you wear, as long as you love wearing it. If you should like me to buy a replacement—or if you’d prefer to make one yourself—I’ll have not the slightest objection.”

“Actually...I’ve already made something.”

“Oh?” He raised a brow. “When did you have time for that?”

“In February,” she mumbled.

“Feb—? Oh, right! You spent January in bed,” he recalled, thinking back on their

dinner conversation, “and February in your workshop. But you didn’t say what you were making in there! May I see it?”

“Yes, of course.” Bidding goodnight to the handful of remaining revelers, she lead him from the drawing room and down a long corridor, passing by the kitchen stores to enter her workshop.

It was a spare room furnished with two large workbenches—one covered with the in-progress works of Elizabeth’s floral art, the other with Claire’s jewelry-making things—and myriad shelves stacked with supplies for a dozen other feminine crafts, all of which the Greystone ladies excelled at.

“Happy Christmas, Kippers,” Jonathan said, petting the tabby curled up on a stool by the door.

“Here it is.” Looking self-conscious, Claire placed a ring on his outstretched palm.

Jonathan raised it to eye level for a close examination. A line of oval gemstones marched across the slender gold band, trimmed with astonishingly detailed and delicate gold-work, which Jonathan recognized as filigree (having learned all about such things from Claire last year). He gave a low whistle.

She smiled. “Does that mean you approve?”

“Wholeheartedly,” he said in reverent tones. “Makes Granny’s boring old ring look like a rusty screw-nut.”

“Jonathan!” She cuffed him on the shoulder.

“It does, though! I’ll never understand how you can make such teeny little designs—no, don’t explain it to me again!” he added quickly over her indrawn

breath. “I just mean that you’re incredibly talented.”

She blushed prettily. “Thank you.”

Rotating the band to admire each stone, he remarked, “I don’t think I’ve seen a ring like this before, with every jewel a different color. It’s unusual, isn’t it?”

“In England, yes. It’s an acrostic ring, a new fashion from Paris. Each gemstone represents a letter, so that taken together they spell out a secret message.”

“That’s clever.” Jonathan had always been impressed by how much thought she put into her pieces. Never content ‘just’ to make a pretty trinket, she was constantly seeking out new techniques and innovations. “How do I decipher the message?”

“Nothing tricky—it’s just the initial of each stone. The first one is?—”

“Don’t tell me!” he bid her. “I want to solve it myself.”

“Oh!” She made an apologetic face. “I fear you’ll find it difficult, since you won’t be familiar with several of them.”

“I may be familiar. Let’s see...a green stone comes first. Is it an emerald?”

“No.” Her eyes danced. “Do you give up?”

“Never!” He gave a lopsided grin. “But do give me just the first answer, please.”

“Chalcedony.”

“Kal-se-what? Never would have reckoned that one. Is the first letter K or C?”

“It’s C.”

“Very well, next we have something blue. Sapphire?”

“No! Shall I tell you?”

Sighing, he nodded.

“Lapis lazuli.”

“Ah! Yes, now I recognize it. C—L. All right, now an iridescent green, or perhaps blue. Looks familiar, but...what is it?”

“An opal.”

“No! Aren’t opals white?”

She laughed. “It is white, if you look closely. But I wanted it to complement the other stones, so I chose one with lots of fire—that’s the shimmery blue-green that you see.”

“Huh. So we have C—L—O, and then comes another green one—though a bit of a bluer green—still, I shall guess emerald!”

“It’s vesuvianite—first discovered on Mount Vesuvius, you may be interested to know.”

“Indeed I am! By Jove, was I there just last month? Italy seems a lifetime ago.” He shook his head to clear it. “At any rate, that makes C—L—O—V, and yet another green stone comes next, so tell me it’s not an emerald.”

“But it is.”

“Well, I’ll be! And is this one beside it a sapphire?”

“Right again!”

“Only one more to go, then: C—L—O—V—E—S, and...oh, no! Has the last stone fallen out?”

“Actually, I never set it,” she admitted with a sheepish air. “I couldn’t, because I didn’t know what stone to use. But now I do. Would you like to see it as well? It will take a few minutes.”

“Of course I want to see it!” Enjoying himself, he rolled his eyes at her. “I cannot leave without solving the puzzle.”

She laughed as she moved to her workbench, where she opened a drawer and pulled out three large, very unusually shaped keys. Then she walked across the workshop to a tall, dark, equally unusual cabinet. It looked ancient and fancy and seemed to be made of...

“Is that cabinet made of iron?”

“Yes. It may look like a cabinet to you, but it’s a safe.”

“It must weigh a ton.”

“At least. Interesting, isn’t it? I’m told it’s been sitting right in this spot for more than a hundred years.” As she talked, she slipped her fingers along some decorative pieces, apparently finding a few release mechanisms, because all of a sudden three keyholes appeared. “The keys have to be used in a certain order,” she explained, using the ones she’d brought with her to complete the sequence. “And then...” He heard a loud click before she pulled a hidden lever and the door swung open. “There we go.”

The safe was neatly filled with boxes and trays made of wood, leather, and velvet. “There we go, indeed,” he repeated, fascinated.

She grinned and reached inside, removing a long, thin black leather box.

“These are my colored stones,” she said, in answer to his unasked question. She flipped a flap cover to reveal a single neat row of small paper packets. Pulling one out, she opened the precisely folded paper and placed the contents in his hand.

“It’s beautiful.” He marveled at the large red heart-shaped gem. “Ruby?” he guessed.

“Correct! It’s flawless, so it deserves to be made into something very special. I’ve been working on a pendant design.” She plucked it from his palm, her fingers flying as she refolded the paper around it in a complicated pattern. Even having seen her do it, Jonathan doubted he could make such a parcel from a plain rectangle of paper.

She replaced the packet and flipped through a dozen or more. On the fronts, Jonathan glimpsed nonsensical numbers in tiny, precise handwriting. With a smile and a nod, she finally pulled one out and unfolded it, revealing a much (much!) smaller opaque green stone.

“It’s jade,” she said “A perfect oval cabochon—and just the right size to be the last stone in my ring.”

“Jade...” He thought for a moment before the answer came to him. “Does C stand for Claire? If so, then could your wedding ring spell out Claire l-o-v-e-s...Jonathan?”

She nodded vigorously. “You solved it!”

“Claire loves Jonathan.” His heart swelled. “Does she?”

“She does.” Wearing a mischievous grin, she dropped a deep curtsy. “I love you, your grace.”

This time, he couldn’t chide her for the your grace . He was too busy laughing. “I love you, too.” He caught her up and twirled her around (slightly jostling the stool beneath Kippers, who leapt to the floor with a plaintive mew). “And the ring is perfect—or it will be, once it’s finished. I can’t wait to put it on your finger tomorrow.”

She smiled into his eyes. “You’d better clear off, then, and let me get to work.”

After stealing a kiss, Jonathan went in search of his coachman. A series of inquiries sent him zigzagging about the castle grounds, strolling down to the village, and ducking into the Black Horse, where at last he met his quarry. Unfortunately, the fellow had fallen deep into his cups (for which Jonathan could scarcely blame him, given he’d been off duty and it was Christmas Eve).

There was nothing for it—Jonathan had to go fetch the license himself.

Luckily, the clear weather held, and the waxing moon gave a tolerable amount of light. By way of an absurdly enormous tip, Jonathan enlisted a hardy-looking groom to ride alongside him. They took turns bearing a lantern to further aid the horses’ footing. After hours in the saddle followed by an apprehensive foray into his dark and silent house, he felt sure of disappointment—but at once discovered the license awaiting him on his desk.

They made splendid time on the return journey, and Jonathan even scraped an hour or two of sleep before the clanging of church bells roused the castle to joyous worship. After the two nights he’d spent at Greystone—one on a horse, one on a torture device masquerading as a sofa—small wonder if he did nod off in the family pew, what with its benches and walls all upholstered in velvet. But at the conclusion of the Christmas

service, he came instantly awake, all fatigue drummed out of him by the jitters of anticipation.

The Greystone party filed out with the rest to mill about the churchyard. St. Michael's was a typical country church drenched in charm, and today the picturesque scene was enhanced by the snow blanketing its sloped roof, the bells ringing out cheerily, and all the pink-cheeked parishioners turned out in their Christmas best.

But Jonathan saw none of it, for he was keeping his eyes on the vestibule.

When at last it yielded the stout form of the Reverend Mr. Hanley, Jonathan made to alert Rachael—quite unnecessarily, he saw at once. For Rachael had already pounced, and within ten minutes had Claire and Jonathan installed before the altar and the vicar opening his Book of Common Prayer.

The ceremony was short, simple, and perfect. If Jonathan felt perhaps the tiniest of pangs at his mother's absence, he reminded himself she had buttered her own bread, and everyone else he'd grown to love was here. Noah stood up as his best man, while Claire had her two sisters for bridesmaids and Griffin to give her away. Wearing a cream-colored velvet dress and a lace veil, she carried a bouquet of Elizabeth's dried flowers. Jonathan carried the ring.

It was over in a trice. Vows and ring were exchanged, the parish register signed, and they were married. It had happened so fast that Jonathan felt it would be many hours before the reality truly sunk in—and many weeks before he could at all acclimate himself to so much happiness.

For her part, Claire was likewise in disbelief. She and Jonathan, married? Impossible! After such a run of bad luck as they had faced!

Yet somehow, it was true. Four wedding days, twelve miserable months, and one

accidental poisoning later, at long last Fate had seen fit to bring them together—though just yesterday Claire would have sworn that fickle entity was determined to keep them apart.

But today, from Claire's vantage ground, all was sunshine and serendipity. Since childhood she'd watched countless weddings at St. Michael's, all with the same traditional words echoing round the old, familiar edifice, which having stood for six centuries already, seemed bound to endure at least that many more. Now it was Claire's turn, and as she underwent the ritual, she felt the presence of all those couples who'd come before and all who would come after.

Most especially she felt the presence of her parents, married on this very spot some twenty-odd years ago. She felt their love for her and their blessings upon her marriage—upon the new family she was creating with Jonathan. Though her parents were no longer able to guide her, she knew she would always be guided by their example. For it was they who'd shown her what a loving marriage looked like.

After a burst of cheers and dried flower petals from the congregation (which barely filled the first pew, being comprised only of the other houseguests), the vicar lost no time expelling them from the church. Jonathan couldn't fault the chap, having seen how Rachael had manhandled him—and in lieu of his customary tip, left a large donation on the way out.

Back at the castle, it was time for Christmas dinner—which would also serve as the wedding breakfast. And though they had mulled wine for champagne and Christmas pudding for wedding cake, Jonathan could not have conceived of a better one. The feast itself was magnificent (especially the dressed breast of lamb). But it was the atmosphere that truly filled him up. Everybody gathered round the table, loud and merry, laughing and bickering...it was exactly what he'd never had, growing up alone with maman .

In the process of gaining Claire as his wife, he reflected, contentedly gazing round the table, he had also gained this . A new family—big, boisterous, and loving as even the loneliest little boy could wish.

It was almost enough to make up for the mother he'd lost.

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After dinner, they removed to the drawing room for the exchange of Christmas gifts. Everyone seated themselves to await the guest of honor, who soon toddled in wearing a gown of frothy lace and holding tight to her nursemaid's hand.

At a year and one half, little Georgiana had Rachael's dark curls and Griffin's leaf-green eyes, which were just then wide open and staring round at all the people come to dote and shower gifts upon her. With her mother's intrepidity, she stood her ground against the onslaught. And with just a little instruction, she got the trick of ripping open her parcels—the contents of which were sadly no match for the delights of plain brown paper and string.

Only after the child had finished and returned to the nursery did the adults have their turn. First came the gifts Claire had made for the gentlemen, who each received a handsome enameled watch fob. For the ladies, Noah had chosen Paisley shawls, and after unwrapping them with praise for his good taste, they immediately began to speculate upon the identity of the woman who must have aided him.

Sadly, this diverting topic was cut short by Lady Caroline fleeing in tears.

While the ladies exchanged guilty looks, chivalry came from an unlikely quarter: the always affable—and almost always thoughtless—Captain Talbot. Perhaps moved by the Christmas spirit (or just bored, having blown through all his gifts in one rapacious frenzy), the captain went gallantly to her aid. The gesture earned him near-universal acclaim, and brought Jonathan to feel he'd misjudged the fellow.

But one among them did not look on Talbot's exit with approval: Poor Elizabeth watched the proceeding with an expression of shock and dismay. Seeing this,

Jonathan nudged Claire, who promptly distracted her sister by demanding she open Claire's gift.

The little velvet bag was duly opened, and Elizabeth looked pleased to find within a delicate silver pendant in the shape of a heart, studded with diamonds and entwined with a rose formed of a gleaming pink metal.

"What sort of metal is this?" Elizabeth asked. "I don't think I've seen it before."

"Indeed, you haven't," Claire said proudly. "It's a new alloy called Russian gold. One mixes gold and copper to get the rosy color."

Elizabeth admired its tones against her skin. "Lovely!" she declared.

"May I see?" Jonathan ventured to ask. Though he'd felt no hostility from her this morning, he'd maintained a cautious distance thus far.

To his relief, her answer was perfectly friendly. "If you'll help me put it on afterward!"

"I'd be delighted." They shared a smile as the piece exchanged hands, and he wondered whether he'd imagined her standoffishness last night.

Between misunderstanding both her and Talbot, it seemed his judgement had become rather unreliable.

"Exquisite," he concluded after examining the pendant, favoring Claire with a doting look. "And quite fitting, too, given Elizabeth's love of flowers."

"Oh, I despise roses," Elizabeth said cheerfully, turning round to present her neck. "So difficult to press!"

Jonathan cleared his throat as he fastened the chain. “Never mind,” he said, “it looks beautiful on you.”

“It does,” came Elizabeth’s muffled reply, for she’d ducked her chin to see for herself, “despite the evil rose! Thank you, Claire.”

Claire rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Happy Christmas!”

“My turn next.” Rummaging amid his pile for Claire’s gift, Jonathan came up with it triumphantly. “I think I’ll open this one!”

“Oh!” Claire bit her lip. “Right! Before you do, however, that’s not your real gift. That is—it is a gift, and it is for you, but—um—well, to tell you the truth, it’s your gift from last year. I’m so sorry! I know it’s a poor excuse, but I only learned you were coming at the eleventh hour, so I was quite short of time?”

“Claire,” he interrupted, using the growl he’d noticed was quite effective at silencing her. “It’s fine. May I open it now?”

The wrappings concealed a large tome with a burnished leather cover. Its only ornament was an unusual silver book clasp. Embellished with an overlay of gold-wrought feathers, the clasp had the shape of a bird with a very long tail.

“Venus’s peacock?” Jonathan touched the finely etched feathers. “Did you make this?”

She nodded.

“But last Christmas you hadn’t yet seen the villa. How...?”

“You’ll see.”

Moving to a table, he laid the book down and carefully released its clasp. By now everybody had clustered round to see the impressive-looking volume. He opened it to the first page and found there not words, but a picture. A picture he recognized. Drawn by a deft and graceful hand, rendered with as much beauty as precision.

He turned the page to find another. And another, and another. “Are these?—?”

“All the engravings you brought home to me last year,” Claire said. “And many more besides.”

Jonathan flipped more pages. There were dozens upon dozens of them, depicting every detail of the villa. “How did you do this?”

“Noah helped me contact a Mr. Richard Smirke, whose initials I’d seen on the engravings. When he heard I was making a book for you, he was only too happy to furnish copies of more of his work. I shouldn’t have presumed to use your name, but...”

Jonathan had paused on a close study of the Venus mosaic. “You got the peacock from here.”

“That’s right,” she said with a helpless laugh. “At the time I’d no idea it was your favorite mosaic! I just liked the birds.”

He flipped a few more pages before pausing on a mosaic dolphin. He touched the bottom of the page, where a second set of initials appeared alongside the R.S. for Richard Smirke: S.L. —for Samuel Lysons.

Closing the book, he finally looked at Claire. “Thank you. It’s thoughtful and absolutely wonderful. I only wish...” He shook his head. “Well, by comparison, my gift to you seems rather silly.”

“Oh!” Blowing out a breath, she grinned. “I’m sure you’re wrong! At any rate, it doesn’t signify. I’m just glad you like the book.”

“I love it.” Now it was Jonathan’s turn to feel nervous, and his gaze slid away from hers, meeting Mr. Evans’s behind her.

The butler nodded and slipped out.

Claire noticed the exchange. “What’s going on?” she asked.

Jonathan thought for a moment how best to explain. “On the Grand Tour,” he began, “one is always assumed to be in the market for art.”

“Oh?” She blinked. “I never realized you were a collector.”

“I’m not,” he said wryly. “But it proved difficult to avoid the frenzy altogether. I felt a particular desire to buy a painting for you —some scene of beauty that might always bring a smile to your face. I considered many pieces—and even purchased a few—but nothing seemed quite right, until...”

As he was speaking, two footmen had entered carrying between them a flat, fabric-draped object nearly as wide as Claire was tall.

“I must warn you,” he went on anxiously, “it’s a bit...different. The others are of the usual sort, the French pastoral scenes and Italian landscapes—and should you prefer those paintings, we might certainly hang them instead! In fact, they ought to be hung regardless, for there’s not a thing wrong with them, except they don’t remind me of you.”

“Very well,” she said gravely, though with a glint in her eye. “Is the artist anyone of note?”

“Not much,” he replied, suppressing a smile. Something in her manner made him suspect she knew nothing at all of art. “Neapolitan fellow, I believe. Name of Rivalta.”

“Hmm,” she said importantly. “I cannot say I’m familiar with his work. Let’s have a look.”

“By all means. But really, if you don’t like it?—”

With a dramatic flourish, she threw off the drapery—and the whole chamber seemed as one to freeze.

Jonathan watched her face in suspense, gritting his teeth. If she’d hoped to see rolling Tuscan hills or Venetian canals, she must be sorely disappointed. The painting he’d bought her was a still-life, and could not be to everyone’s taste. It was, at first glance perhaps, a little dark and rather ordinary. But there was something of merit in its subject, Jonathan had thought—admittedly under the influence of grappa—which was that of a plump tabby cat plundering the kitchen table, caught out with a dead mackerel in its mouth.

At length Claire proclaimed, “It’s marvelous!”

Jonathan released the breath he’d been holding. “Truly? You like it?”

“I love it! He looks just like my Kippers!”

“Upon my word, he does!” Noah agreed. “I’ve seen him in just that attitude on numerous occasions.”

“A toast to Kippers...” Jonathan tossed back a draught of eggnog. “Well, how relieved I am! It seemed a mad notion, but I just had a feeling...”

“Mad indeed,” Miss Harris confided to Elizabeth in a carrying whisper. “Who wants to look at a heap of rotting fish?”

Ignoring her, Claire gazed upon her painting fondly. “I admit I might not have picked it out of a gallery, having no eye for such things myself. But I cannot look at it without smiling, just as you said.” Turning to Jonathan, she skimmed back the lock of his hair that was forever falling forward. “You know me better than I know myself.”

“I don’t know about that.” Lowering his voice, Jonathan touched her hand. “But I mean never to disappoint you again.”

“Oh, dear!” Though wearing a smile, she shook her head. “That will not do, my love. I’m afraid we shall disappoint each other many times over the years. Better to vow we’ll never doubt each other again. That, I think, we can carry off splendidly.”

Transfixed by her sparkling eyes and not trusting himself to speak, he settled for raising her hand to his lips. Though he would have liked to say—and do—much more, he would have to wait for privacy.

Her mere nearness was so enchanting, even this small liberty was a risk. For though he’d have sworn his heart was already full, each day he spent with her seemed to increase his love tenfold. The dam was overtaxed, and should it give way, he feared the bounds of propriety insufficient to stem the tide.

So he settled for kissing her hand—a kiss of silent promise—and relinquished it for the time being, banishing such feelings to the recesses of his mind. Then, taking a deep breath, he called for more eggnog to get him through the latest round of gifts.

And for the first time in his life, wished Christmas would come to a very speedy end.

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Twineham Park

Saturday, 1st January 1820

2 o'clock in the afternoon. — Deepest apologies for the long absence, Diary! I confess I've been too busy and happy to write. And I fear this is to be my final entry in your pages, for my New Year's gift from Jonathan was a new diary to replace the one I 'thrashed' (his word). It's exquisite, all of marbled, gold-edged Venetian paper he purchased abroad, and lately had bound and stamped with my new moniker (C.R. for Claire Rathborne). I cannot wait to write in it!

Oh, but never think you shall be eclipsed, my cherished friend! As promised, I've made you a little jacket of green silk, embroidered with a lovely frieze of mistletoe and oranges. I plan to wrap you up all splendid and snug, and keep you in a place of honor on my mantle, as a happy reminder of Jonathan's and my first Christmas together (for, of course, the previous one is to be entirely forgotten).

But before you're put away, I've something of a very striking nature to confide in you! I've been itching to do so ever since the episode occurred, but alas, I simply have not had a moment to myself. It's all been a whirl of celebrating, packing, unpacking, receiving visitors—and that was before my siblings came to stay!

Thankfully, my ever-gallant husband (husband!) has today contrived for me a couple hours of peace. After luncheon he announced himself desirous of a nice, long walk now that the snow has melted, and proposed to tour our guests all round his finest woods. Elizabeth, of course, leapt at the idea; and while he prevailed upon the others to join—even Rachael in her delicate condition—with a covert wink I was

encouraged to stay behind and “rest.”

The dear, clever man! I cannot remember making mention of my wish for solitude, yet somehow, he just knew . He understands me on a level so profound, so unerring, I could almost swear he sees directly into my very sou

Half past. — Well. I may have slightly overestimated my husband’s perceptiveness.

Hmph.

It would appear Jonathan did not, in fact, look into my soul, nor did he devise an elaborate scheme to grant my secret wish, nor indeed, had he any notion of said wish’s existence. All of this was made clear to me on his bursting into my dressing room, not ten minutes after having vacated the house, with a certain gleam in his eye...

When I asked what on earth he was doing here, he responded with amazement. Regarding me as though I were the thick one, he explained that after delivering our guests into the capable hands of his gamekeeper, he’d dashed back to me so we could take advantage of the empty house to?—

La, I cannot write it without blushing! You know.

At any rate, he was taken aback to find me neither aware nor enamored of this project. And when I divulged the fact of my having quite a different project in mind, he answered blithely that we should have ample time for both, could I but spare him twenty minutes.

Naturally, I looked askance! I was sure I’d mistaken him, for it wasn’t possible to confine such activities to so short a window—was it?

He insisted it was. Though skeptical, I allowed him a chance to prove his theory...which he did, to marvelous effect! Here I sit, just twenty minutes later—eighteen, if truth be told—in a glow of marital bliss and ready to resume my work. Will wonders never cease?

And in the daytime, no less! Having already been married a whole week, why am I just now learning of this option?

I suppose lack of opportunity may well account for it. When the Greystone party broke up on the morning after our wedding, we removed to Twineham Park at once. The bulk of that day was spent in the enclosed chaise, which some might reckon as a fit venue for romance—but anybody who's shared such a vehicle with their cat would attest otherwise. And since arriving, a constant stream of morning callers and evening engagements have kept us on the hop.

Not that I'm complaining! Setting up house has been rather a joy, for at Greystone I was expected to carry on Rachael's ways, while here I may run things just as I please.

It is a lot of work, of course, what with everything being so much larger and grander: the house, the lovely park, and the army of staff we must hire to maintain them. Some of the old servants have returned, but many found other jobs or (rumor has it) defected to the dowager's residence. I imagine replacing them all will take some weeks, and until then we'll just have to muddle through.

Even so, I adore the house! It's a Palladian mansion full of well-proportioned rooms and Chippendale furniture, and already I grow too fond of lofty ceilings and modern conveniences to ever go back to a castle. The chimneys don't smoke! The windows go up and down! We have three water closets with the new flush toilets, and—if you can believe it!—even one of Feetham's Patent ShowerBaths (though I do wish it weren't so cold).

Best of all, instead of a dingy old storeroom, I'm to have a new workshop with good light and a safe that doesn't require a handful of keys and the memory of an elephant. Hurrah!

Our neighbors are another bright spot, for I've enjoyed meeting them all. They seem a lively and attentive set, no less effusive in their welcome of me than in their hopes for my new regime. On visiting, few have hesitated to broach the subject of the previous duchess's unsociable habits, nor hint at their satisfaction in finding me her reverse. And none left without securing our attendance at their forthcoming dinner party, dance, or card game.

Of course, this left us bound to return the hospitality, and we did so last night, gathering nearly twenty couples between our neighbors and guests for a New Year's Eve ball. I delivered the invitations in person, along with anxious warnings and advance apologies for the present deficiency of our household.

But despite dire predictions, my ball was a triumph—in no small part due to my very clever (and totally unwitting) strategy of lowering everybody's expectations! For it allowed everybody to find our style of entertaining rather better than anticipated, and by that token, discover me to be a capital hostess and charming addition to the neighborhood. I am an instant success!

But alas, nearly four pages I've filled and not a word of it to the purpose! I've yet even to mention the striking episode which prompted this writing. Horsefeathers, what a jumble I am at present!

I blame my husband and his infernal interruptions. Even now he calls out to me from the bedroom! But I shall not answer him. Tempted though I may be, I shall brook no further distractions.

3 o'clock. — Very well, that was the final distraction.

And I cannot be faulted for giving in, I'll have you know! Jonathan has learned how to order me about in that gravelly way he has, and if it weren't for his being the very soul of compassion, I should be properly afraid of his wielding such power. (Also if I didn't enjoy it so much.)

At any rate, I am now back at my writing desk and determined not to move until I have finished. Jonathan and his tricks be hanged!

The story begins with Christmas dinner—with the plum pudding, to be exact. Our old family recipe calls for little silver charms to be baked into the pudding, which are said to confer special blessings upon whoever should discover them. And this year's distribution of charms was auspicious indeed! It went as follows:

Found by me: the ship, conferring safe harbor

Found by Jonathan: the wishbone, conferring good luck

Found by Lady Caroline: the ring, conferring a forthcoming marriage

Found by Elizabeth: the coin, conferring a fortune in the offing

Found by Mr. Nathaniel Chase: the thimble, conferring a life of blessedness

Now, to understand the pertinence of all the charms will require some further explanation.

The first two we may dispense with in rapid fashion, for obviously, I've at last found (1) safe harbor in the arms of my beloved. Meanwhile, Jonathan has had the great (2) good luck to win his bride after such a series of misfortunes and misunderstandings kept us apart.

Huzzah for love!

Now on to the next. Sometime following the final gift's unwrapping, a little cache of unopened parcels was discovered—all addressed to Lady Caroline! It was at that point we realized she had never returned to the drawing room, and nor had her champion, Captain Talbot. After Rachael volunteered to go up and knock on the Opal Room's door, she returned not with a heartened Caroline, but with a note hastily scrawled in her hand. When it was read aloud, we all got a shock: Caroline and Captain Talbot had eloped! (3) A forthcoming marriage!

Nobody looked more shocked than Elizabeth, and after Noah galloped off to alert the would-be-bride's father, I contrived to see Elizabeth alone and offer consolation. Though the captain is a rogue who everyone knows to be drowning in debt—and though in truth I am thrilled he was stolen from under Elizabeth's nose—still I felt she deserved compassion for suffering such a disappointment.

But as it turns out, Elizabeth wasn't disappointed—for it was she who did the disappointing!

When she'd spent Christmas Eve acting withdrawn and preoccupied (which I had noticed, and now feel guilty for having been too wrapped up in my own affairs to address) it was because she'd been contemplating an elopement of her own!

During their ramble that day at the Bignor Villa, Captain Talbot had opened his heart to her, and, citing his modest means as an obstacle to obtaining her brother's blessing, begged her to run away with him. Believing herself sincerely attached, and with Mary Harris whispering in her ear what a wonderful adventure it should be for Elizabeth (rather, in my estimation, what an entertaining scandal it should be for Mary), my sister needed the better part of a day to make up her mind. But in the end good sense prevailed, and she realized the captain's charms were not worth the gamble of losing her family's good opinion, to say nothing of her reputation and all her fortune into the

bargain!

For even love-addled Elizabeth couldn't help seeing what the captain was. To be attempting an elopement—let alone two of them!—the poor fool had to be in truly dire straits. Such a desperate step bespeaks a crisis of the sort one can only hope to escape by securing some impressionable lady's dowry. Had he got his hands on Elizabeth's money, most of it would have gone straight to his creditors, with any leavings soon to follow. My poor sister would have been destitute.

But—thank heaven!—that shan't come to pass. Elizabeth and her future are safe. From the very brink of ruin, she is now restored to every prospect of—prepare yourself for a thunderbolt— (4) a fortune in the offing!

Do you see? The fortune Elizabeth has obtained is her own, rescued from the clutches of a swindler!

Is that not tied with a bow?

I do feel for Lady Caroline, however. Though her father led a party out in pursuit of the fugitives, they managed to evade capture and are in all probability married by now. One can only hope that her fortune—which, as the sole heiress of her father's estate, is sure to be enormous—combined with her domineering streak, will be enough to either fund or quash her husband's follies. If anyone could take him on, I'm convinced it is Caroline!

Of the fifth and final prophecy—a blessed life for my cousin Mr. Chase—I'll admit I stood in doubt. Especially given what happened the morning after my wedding.

We were all at breakfast, after which the guests were to depart, when Mr. Evans stormed into the dining parlor. In a manner permitting no argument, he bid Mr. and Mrs. Nathaniel Chase to come with him, and that was that! They left the castle, and

we've heard nothing from the pair since.

Only after the remaining houseguests took their leave did we learn more. Noah had the tale from his valet and conveyed it to Elizabeth, Jonathan, and me as we were gathered to make our own farewells. It seems while the footmen transported our Honorable cousins' baggage downstairs, one of Mrs. Chase's cases sprung open—and what do you think fell out?

Why, nothing but a cache of our best silver! Can you imagine?

That would have made an end of the matter—and all association with the Lakefield branch of the family—if not for servants' gossip. At least, I assume it's the castle servants who circulated the news, since my siblings and husband all vow they spoke to no one.

At any rate, word of the thwarted crime seems to have spread like wildfire, for when Noah arrived here yesterday, he brought with him a very embarrassed letter from our cousin the viscount! Dispensing quickly with felicitations on Lady Claire's brilliant match, his lordship dwelt far longer on apologies for his son and daughter-in-law's disgrace. He laments this younger son has always sought his fortune through schemes and speculations, rather than a profession, and begs us not to paint the whole family with the scoundrel's brush, for all his other children are infinitely Nathaniel's superior.

Lastly, below the signature, the viscount had added a hopeful postscript: due to the very public shame of this latest indiscretion, Nathaniel had at last been prevailed on to take orders. The proud father now sat in happy expectation of seeing his wayward son installed as vicar of a respectable country church by midsummer.

(5) A life of blessedness, indeed!

For pity's sake, do I hear Jonathan calling me again? Does the man never tire?

Half past three. — Hmph. It wasn't Jonathan after all, but only Kippers mewing at the door. After letting him in I peeped into the bedroom—and found Jonathan fast asleep!

Though I ought to leave him be, he looks so adorably tousled (the hair!) that I can't resist curling up next to him until the others return. I shan't wake him, of course—though he is a light sleeper. Oh, piffle. Well, I'll do my best, but should some accidental jostling occur...

I'm sure I can make it up to him somehow.

Before I bid you farewell, my treasured friend (who I mean to revisit often, by frequent perusals of your joy-filled pages), I have just one more incident to share.

This morning brought yet another caller to our door: the Dowager Duchess of Rathborne. No one else was yet abroad, so I received her alone in the saloon. She paid her respects to the bride, inquired after her son, and accepted a dish of tea. I in turn asked after Rousseau, who is evidently laid up with a cold, and extended my sympathies. After exactly a quarter of an hour—the proper length for an introductory visit—she took her leave.

All in all, a promising start.

Euphorically ever after,

Claire

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How the Marquess Was Won

Book One of

Sweet Chase Brides: The Regency

Lady Alexandra Chase has always liked being the perfect daughter. But when her brother's best friend—and secret obsession—returns from a long spell abroad, family duty and a flawless reputation suddenly seem less important than the chance, however slight, that her girlhood crush might notice her now that she's all grown up...

Cainewood Castle, the South of England

Summer 1812

IT WAS ALMOST like touching him.

Lady Alexandra Chase usually sketched a profile in just a few minutes, but she took her time today, lingering over her work in the darkened room. Standing on one side of a large, framed pane of glass while Tristan sat sideways on the other, she traced his shadow cast by the glow of a candle. Her pencil followed his strong chin, his long, straight nose, the wide slope of his forehead, capturing his image on the sheet of paper she'd tacked to her side of the glass. Noticing a stray lock that tumbled down his brow, she hesitated, wanting to make certain she caught it just right.

Someone walked by the open door, causing Tris's shadow to flicker as the candle

wavered. “Are you finished yet?” he asked from behind the glass panel.

“Hold still,” she admonished. “Artistry requires patience.”

“It’s just a profile.”

Alexandra flushed, though she knew better than to take offense. He was simply impatient. He’d always been an admirer of her work.

As well he should be. Alexandra made excellent profile portraits.

“You promised you’d sit still,” she reminded him, injecting authority into her girlish voice. “Just this once before you leave.” She’d been asking Tris to sit for her for months, but he never seemed to have the time. This would be her only chance.

“I’m sitting,” he said, and although his profile remained immobile, she could hear amusement in his tone.

She loved his good-humored forbearance, just like she loved everything about Tris Nesbitt.

She’d been eight when they first met. Her favorite brother, Griffin, had brought him home between school terms. In the six years since, as he and Griffin completed Eton and then Oxford, Tris had visited often, claiming to prefer his friend’s large family to the quiet home he shared with his father.

Alexandra couldn’t remember when she’d fallen in love, but she felt like she’d loved Tris forever.

Of course, nothing would come of it. Now, at fourteen, she was mature enough to accept that her eminent father, the Marquess of Cainewood, would never allow her to

marry plain Mr. Tristan Nesbitt.

But that didn't stop her from wishing. It didn't stop her stomach from tingling when she heard his voice, didn't stop her heart from skipping when he looked at her with his silver-gray eyes.

Not that he looked at her often. After all, as far as he was concerned she was little more than Griffin's pesky younger sister.

Knowing Tris couldn't see her now, she skimmed her fingertips over his silhouette, wishing she were touching him instead. She'd never touched him, not in real life. Such intimacy simply didn't occur between young ladies and gentlemen. Most especially between a marquess's daughter and a commoner.

The drawing room's draperies were shut, and the low light seemed to enclose them together—alone!—in the room. She desperately wanted to say something clever or diverting, something he would remember after they parted. But she could think of nothing. "Where are you going again?" she asked instead, although she knew.

Let him think she'd barely noticed he was leaving.

"Jamaica." He sounded excited. "My uncle wishes me to look after his interests there. I'm to learn how his plantation is run."

"Is that what you wish to do with your life?"

"He doesn't mean for me to stay there permanently. Only to acquaint myself with the operation so I can manage it from afar."

"But do you wish to become a man of business? To manage property? Or would you rather do something else?"

He shrugged, his profile tilting, then settling back into the lines she'd so carefully drawn. "He paid for my education. Have I any choice?"

"I suppose not." Her choices were limited, too. "How long will you be gone?"

"A year or two at the least. Perhaps more."

Everything was changing. Griffin would leave soon as well—their father had bought him a commission in the cavalry. Although Griffin and Tris had spent much of the past few years away at school and university, these new developments seemed different. They'd be oceans away. It wasn't that Alexandra would be alone—she'd still have her parents, her oldest brother, and her two younger sisters—but she was already feeling the loss.

"Two years," she echoed, knowing Griffin would likely be gone even longer. "That seems a lifetime."

Tris's image shook as he laughed aloud. "I expect it might, to one as young as you."

He seemed so much older, already twenty years of age. Alexandra could scarcely imagine being two decades old. And young boys experienced more of the world than girls, leaving home as adolescents to pursue their educations. They spent time hunting at country houses and carousing about London while girls stayed at home with their mothers.

She was counting the months until she'd finally turn sixteen and have her first London season. She used to spend hours dressing up in Mama's old gowns and playing with her younger sisters, imagining the balls, the finery, and the grand young lords who would sweep them off their feet. One of those charming gentlemen would be her entrée to a new life as a society wife. And she would love her husband, she was certain, although right now she could hardly imagine loving anyone but Tris.

“Will you bring me something from Jamaica?” she asked, startling herself with her boldness.

“Like what? A pineapple or some sugarcane?”

It was her turn to laugh. “Anything. Surprise me.”

“All right, then. I will.” He fell silent a moment, as though trying to commit the promise to memory. “Are you finished yet?”

“For now.” She set down her pencil and walked to the windows, drew back the draperies, and blinked. The room’s familiar blue-and-coral color scheme suddenly seemed too bright.

She turned toward him, reconciling his face with the profile she’d just sketched. She wouldn’t describe him as pretty. His jaw was too strong, his mouth too wide, his brows too thick and straight. As she watched, he raked a hand through his hair—tousled, streaky dark blond hair that always seemed just a bit too long.

Her fingers itched to touch it, to sweep the stray lock from his forehead.

“It will take me a while to complete the portrait,” she told him as she walked back to where he sat beside the glass, “but I’ll have it ready for you before you leave.”

“Keep it for me.”

She blew out the candle, leaning close enough to catch a whiff of his scent, smelling soap and starch and something else she couldn’t put her finger on. “Don’t you want it?”

He rose from the chair, smiling down at her from his greater height. “I’ll probably

lose it if I take it with me.”

“Very well, then.” She’d been hoping he’d say she should keep it to remember him by. “I wish you a safe journey, Mr. Nesbitt.”

She’d called him Tristan—or Tris—for years now, but suddenly that seemed too informal.

His gray gaze remained steady. “Thank you, Lady Alexandra. I wish you a happy life.”

A happy life. She could be married by the time he returned, she realized with a shock. In fact, if he were gone two whole years, she very likely would be.

Her heart sank at the thought.

But at least she’d have his profile. When it was finished, she’d have a perfect likeness of his face, black-on-white in an elegant oval frame. And she’d been alone with him while making it.

As he walked from the room, she peeled the paper off the glass and hugged it to her chest.

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The Earl's Unsuitable Bride

Book One of

Sweet Chase Brides

Colin Chase, the Earl of Greystone, finds his carefully planned life turned upside down when the Great Fire of London lands a lowly jeweler's daughter in his arms.

London

April 22, 1661

THE DAY AMETHYST Goldsmith was born, her king was beheaded. Now, twelve years later, his son was returning to England, and Amy wanted to see every exciting second of his triumphant procession. Without taller people blocking her view.

Unfortunately, it seemed nearly everyone was taller than she.

She shouldered her way through the crowd, her parents and aunt murmuring apologies in her wake. "Here, there's room!" Finally reaching a few bare inches of rail, she clasped it with both hands and turned to flash them a victorious smile. "Come along, it's starting!"

Hugh and Edith Goldsmith joined her, shaking their heads at their daughter's tenacity. Hugh's sister, Amy's Aunt Elizabeth, squeezed in behind. Ignoring the grumbling of displaced spectators, Amy spread her feet wide to save more room at

the front. “Robert, over here!”

Robert Stanley tugged on her long black plait as he wedged himself in beside her. She shot him a grin; he was fun. Although he’d arrived just last week to train as her father’s apprentice, Amy had known since birth that she was to marry him—or at least since she was old enough to understand such things. So far they seemed to be compatible, although he’d been surprised to find she was far more skilled as a jeweler than he. Surprised and none too pleased, Amy suspected. But he would get over those feelings.

She might be a girl, but, as her father always said, her talent was a God-given gift. She’d never give up her craft. Robert would just have to get used to it.

With a sigh of pleasure, Amy shuffled her shoes on the scrubbed cobblestones. “Look, Mama! Everything is so clean and glorious.” She breathed deep of the fresh air, blinking against the bright sun. “The rain has stopped...even the weather is welcoming the monarchy back to England! Have you ever seen so many people? All London must be here.”

“These cannot all be Londoners.” Her mother waved a hand, encompassing the crowds on the rooftops, the mobbed windows and overflowing balconies. “I think many have come in from the countryside.”

A handful of tossed rose petals drifted down, landing on Amy’s dark head like scented snowflakes. She shook them off, laughing. “Just look at all the tapestries and banners!”

“Just look at all that wasted wine,” Robert muttered, with a nod toward the fragrant red river that ran through the open conduit in the street.

Amy opened her mouth to protest, then decided he must be fooling. “Marry come up, Robert! You must be pleased King Charles will be crowned tomorrow. Our lives have

been so dreary until now. But now Cromwell is gone, and we have music and dancing!” She felt like dancing, like spreading her burgundy satin skirts and twirling in a circle, but the press of the crowd made such a maneuver impossible, so she settled for bobbing a little curtsy. “We’ve beautiful clothes, and the theater?—”

“And drinking and cards and dice,” Robert added.

But Amy wasn’t listening. She’d turned back to ogle the mounted queue of nobility parading their way from the Tower to Whitehall Palace. Such jewels and feathers and lace! Fingering the looped ribbons adorning her new gown, she pressed harder against the rail, wishing she too could join the procession.

“Where did they possibly find so many ostrich feathers in all of England?” she wondered aloud, then burst into giggles.

Her aunt laughed and wrapped an affectionate arm around her shoulders. “Where do you find the energy, child? You must come to Paris. Uncle William and I could use your happy smiles.”

Feeling a stab of sympathy, Amy hugged her around the waist. Aunt Elizabeth had lost her three children to smallpox last year.

“We need her artistry here,” Amy’s father protested, poking his sister good-naturedly. “Your shop will have to do without.”

“Ah, Hugh, how selfish you are!” Aunt Elizabeth chided. “Hoarding my niece’s talent for your own profit.” She aimed a teasing smile at her brother. “No wonder we moved to France to escape the competition.”

Amy grinned. Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle William had been forced to move their shop when business fell off during the Commonwealth years. But they’d flourished in Paris, becoming jewelers to the French court, and wouldn’t think of returning now.

“I’m glad you came for the coronation, Aunty. It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it,” Aunt Elizabeth declared. “Old Noll drove me out of England, so my home is elsewhere now. But heaven knows no one here is happier than I.”

“Listen!” Amy cried. A joyous roar rolled westward toward them, marking the slow passage of His Majesty in the middle of the procession. “Can you hear King Charles coming? There are his attendants!” The noise swelled as the king’s footguards marched by, their plumes of red and white feathers contrasting with those of his brother, the Duke of York, whose guard was decked out in black and white.

All at once, the roar was deafening. Amy grasped her mother’s hand. “It’s him, Mama,” she whispered. “King Charles II.” Glittering in the sunshine, the Horse of State caught and held her gaze. “Oh, look at the embroidered saddle, the pearls and rubies—look at our diamonds!”

Amy didn’t care for horses—she was terrified of them, truth be told—so she paid no attention to the magnificent beast himself. But three hundred of her family’s diamonds sparkled on the gold stirrups and bosses, among the twelve thousand lent for the occasion.

“Oh, Papa,” she breathed, “I wish we could have designed that saddle.”

Aunt Elizabeth’s hand suddenly tightened on Amy’s shoulder. “Charles is looking at me,” she declared loudly.

Amy’s father snorted. “Always the flirt, sister mine.”

Amy’s gaze flew from the dazzling horse to its rider. Smiling broadly beneath his thin mustache, the tall king waved to the crowd. His cloth-of-silver suit peeked from beneath ermine-lined crimson robes. Rubies and sapphires winked from gold shoe

buckles and matching gold garters, festooned with great poufs of silver ribbon. Long, shining black curls draped over his chest, framing a weathered face; the result, Amy supposed, of having suffered through exile and the execution of his beloved father.

But his black eyes were quick and sparkling. Some women around Amy swooned, but she just stared, willing the king to look at her.

When he did, she flashed him a radiant smile. “No, Aunt, he’s looking at me .”

Before her family even stopped laughing, the king was gone, as suddenly as he had arrived. But the spectacle wasn’t over. Behind him came a camel with brocaded panniers and an East Indian boy flinging pearls and spices into the crowd. And then more lords and ladies, more glittering costumes, more decorated stallions, more men-at-arms, all bedecked in gold and silver and the costliest of gems.

Yet none of it mattered to Amy, for there was a young nobleman riding her way.

He looked to be maybe sixteen, a bit older than Robert—but she thought he looked much more mature. It wasn’t the richness of his clothing that caught Amy’s eye, for in truth his garb was rather plain. His black velvet suit was trimmed with naught but gold braid; his wide-brimmed hat boasted only a single white plume. He wore no fancy crimped periwig; instead his own raven-black hair fell in gleaming waves past his chin.

Eyes the color of emeralds bore into Amy’s as he set his horse in her direction. His glossy black gelding breathed close, but she felt no fear, for the young man held her safe with his piercing green gaze. It seemed as though he could see through her eyes right into her soul. Her cheeks flamed; never in her life had a boy looked at her like that.

He tipped his plumed hat. Flustered, she turned and glanced about, certain he must be saluting someone else. But everyone was laughing and talking or watching the

procession; no one focused their attention his way. She looked back, and he grinned as he passed, a beautiful flash of white that made Amy melt inside.

Long after he rode out of sight around the bend, she stared to where he had disappeared.

“Amy?” Robert tugged on her hand.

She turned and gazed into his eyes: pale blue, not green. They didn’t see into her soul, didn’t make her feel anything.

Robert smiled, revealing teeth that overlapped a bit. She hadn’t really noticed that before. “It’s over,” he said.

“Oh.”

The sun set as they walked home to Cheapside, skirting merrymakers in the streets. Her father paused to unlock their door. Overhead, a wooden sign swung gently in the breeze. A nearby bonfire illuminated the image of a falcon and the gilt letters that proclaimed their shop Goldsmith she was supposed to feel fireworks.

But she felt nothing.